

YEAR 2008 - IS IT A REALLY A YEAR OF CHANGE?

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Every year will be remembered for a particular reason and the year 2008 will be remembered for CHANGE. The 12th General Election of the country held on 8 March 2008, brought about a remarkable historic change to the local political scene after 50 years of *MERDEKA*. The Opposition Parties broke the stranglehold of power by the ruling coalition and not only denied it two third majorities in Parliament but also won enough seats to form the government in five States. The unprecedented results of this election often described by many as a political tsunami brought hopes and fears at the same time and there was a long period of uncertainty following the general elections. Though it is ten months since this astonishing event, the enormity of change shocked many who have not completely regained their full composure. After a general election, political activity usually quietens down till the next elections in four to five years time. The year 2008 has seen unabated political activity all year round with claims and counter claims fuelled by high profile by-elections that the work of government surely must have been hampered. The high expectations of change are awaited.

This election particularly saw many members of the profession actively participating in the election process and some of the vocal members have been elected to Parliament. Names of members of the medical fraternity who are Members of Parliament which come to mind are - Dr Lee Boon Chye (MP for Gopeng), Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj (MP for Sg Siput), Dr Tan Seng Giaw (MP for Kepong), Datuk Dr S. Subramaniam, Minister of Human Resources and Dr Ng Yen Yen, Minister of Women, Family and Community, Datuk Dr Abdul Latiff Ahmad, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health. Some of them are active members of the Association while others are not, but I am sure the presence of these doctors in Parliament will help keep medical issues on the Parliamentary radar constantly.

The election would have provided an excellent opportunity to state the stand of the political parties on many issues affecting healthcare but it was surprising that both the candidates and parties paid scant attention to the issues concerning healthcare. As usual, there were no detail manifestos outlining the future of healthcare and there was minimal probing questioning by the public or the media. In the latter part of the year, Medicine got dragged into the murky world of politics, when a doctor and hospital were accused of leaking a medical record of a patient claiming to have been sodomised. A nasty change in the standard of reporting followed this incident. Explicit details of personal and delicate sexual details were front paged continuously causing disgust to a large section of the population mainly the conservative group. There were unsubstantiated accusations that the doctor and hospital had acted unethically and trial by the media against them following this incident was a worrisome trend.

Change also took place in the Ministry of Health as the Minister, YB Dato' Dr Chua Soi Lek had to depart as his private matters became public. Though Ministers and office bearers change, the cordial relationship between the MMA and the Ministry of Health has been maintained. The new Minister, YB Dato' Liow Tiong Lai was briefed on the challenges to the profession and healthcare delivery. SCHOMOS issues highlighted included automatic promotion to U44 after completion of 2 years as houseman, waiting time for medical graduates to be employed as houseman, duration of compulsory service, allowances for government doctors, remuneration for medical officers and specialists working after office hours and to consider the request of specialists and medical officers who have opted for the EPF scheme to switch to the pension scheme. Among the PPS issues raised were review of the

Private Healthcare Facilities & Services Act (1998) and its Regulations (2006), MMA Schedule of Fees, Dispensing of Medicines by GPs, Managed Care Organisations and Health Insurance Issue and Medical Examination for Commercial Drivers.

The same age old issue of who should dispense medicine reared its head again and was played out in the media, especially the print media, when the government announced a pilot project to make the pharmacists the sole dispensing agents and removing the doctors' current dispensing rights. The clear division of the opinions between the doctors and pharmacists was glaring and I am sure it would have left the public bewildered. The MMA restated its stand, which it had adopted many years that the patient must have a right to decide and must benefit from any change introduced.

There has been noticeable change in the private healthcare facilities and clinics since the implementation of the Regulations of Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 1998. The single action which attracted unprecedented attention and made the Act infamous was the decision to jail Dr Basmullah Yusom, the first doctor to fall victim of the Act. The controversial decision to charge him and imprison him for three months, for failure to pay a fine of RM120,000, which he says he could ill afford went down badly. Those who were wary of the Act from the beginning were back in full force to emphasise that their prophecy that the Act will be wrongfully used has been proven right. Private medical clinics have provided an essential and sustainable care for a long time and enforcers should realise this and be realistic in their actions. The aim of the Department of Health has to be to work with the doctors to improve the standards of healthcare, which the Association has supported, and not to be overtly authoritative or punitive. Those dealing with the fungus infested multimillion ringgit hospitals have realised that even with the best intentions and lots of money problems it takes time to be rectified. The standards of clinics are changing but there has been little change in many other unhealthy practices of, selling of controlled medicine without prescription, unregistered persons practicing medicine and unethical laboratory activities.

There was a change in the way members of the Association addressed disagreements and disputes. Some members took their grouses to the Registrar of Society (ROS) for the first time since the formation of the MMA to persuade the ROS to use its authority and threat of de-registration to force others to accept their point of view. The MMA received '*a show cause letter*' from the Registrar of Society (ROS) '*as why it should not be de-registered*', in response to complaints made by these members on the membership status and eligibility of Dr David Quek Kwang Leng to contest the post of President-Elect because of his lapses in payment of his membership dues.

A Special General Meeting was held on 27 January after it was requisitioned by 115 members to determine the membership status of the group who had not paid their subscriptions according to the rules and Dr David Quek Kwang Leng's eligibility. There has been much written about the Constitution, activities of Council and about the election of the President-Elect over the last two years and all of this was again debated at length at this meeting. Some took the moral high ground and emphasised that a person aspiring to be a President should not have violated the Constitution even though it might have been unintentional. They insisted that a leader ought to lead by exemplary actions and should not have jeopardised the standing of the Association by dragging it into this controversy, while others were more restrained in their views. The SGM, attended by 180 members, was unable to make a decision and the Council was entrusted to meet and explain the situation to the ROS which we did on 4 February 2008.

The MMA can be pleased that it was able to publish a book called Occupational Health for Health Care Professionals – 'Caring for the Carers'. I would like to thank the two Editors, members of the MMA Society of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Dr G. Jayakumar and Assoc Prof Dr Retneswari Masilamani. The book was two years in the making and was launched on 29 November 2008 and has been well received. This book is the first of its kind for the Asia Pacific Region and

addresses the health and safety issues of all healthcare professionals. I sincerely hope this will make a change and encourage members to indulge in writing and publishing books which will benefit the profession and the public.

The year saw the loss of some of our senior and active members who have contributed actively to the Association. Dr M. K. Rajakumar the President of the MMA from 1979-1980, and often described as a socialist had fought many battles to keep medicine independent and unadulterated. Datuk Dr Lim Say Wan the President of MMA from 1982-1983 was involved in strengthening the Association through many of the activities he undertook and has held many presidencies in other medical and non medical associations. Dr Leow Eng Lee held many posts and was the Honorary General Secretary of the MMA from 1998-1999. His involvement with MMA started as a medical student and has been described as a person who is full of life. Dato' Dr S. Vijayarajam was a popular figure in MMA and though he was active in politics, a senator and part of government he always had time for the Association. Their deaths were a great loss to the medical fraternity and they will be deeply missed.

There has been much euphoria and hype in Malaysia after the March elections, that racial politics has come to an end and that candidates will be chosen on their ability and policies. Though this may be partly true, racial polarisation, thinking and voting along ethnic lines including in the MMA is still the norm. Obama's win in the American presidential race and the change of governments in many countries also gives optimism that the world is ready for greater changes. The landslide of the hill slopes of Ampang destroying property and killing residents, the arrest of a journalist to protect her under ISA, the raging wars in Sri Lanka and Gaza strip, the petty quarrelling and smouldering discontent of disgruntled within the MMA almost paralysing its activity remind us the old ways are still with us. We all know that nothing endures except change and we all live in hope the changes of 2008 will improve the peace and prosperity of the country and the world.

*"We spend January, walking through our lives, room by room, drawing up a list of work to be done, cracks to be patched. Maybe this year, to balance the list, we ought to walk through the rooms of **MMA**... not looking for flaws, but for potential."*

*modified from **Ellen Goodman***