

WHIRLWIND OF ISSUES & ACTIVITIES: FIRST 50 DAYS...

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"Synergise. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Valuing differences is the essence of synergy. And the key to valuing differences is to realise that all people see the world, not as it is, but as they are."

- Stephen Covey

"You have been told that, even like a chain, you are as weak as your weakest link. This is but half the truth. You are also as strong as your strongest link. To measure you by your smallest deed is to reckon the power of the ocean by the frailty of its foam."

-
Kahlil Gibran

The first 50 days of my Presidency has been a torrid flurry of activities and issues.

This is partly because there has been mounting media interests in who, the 'new' leadership, is for the medical profession. Yet perhaps, the other more important issue is my ineptness in gauging what's important and therefore essential for my timely input, while sieving out the endless requests for the attendance (frequently simply ceremonial) of the President of our esteemed Association.

Sometimes, I feel that not to be physically present when invited, is to let the Association down, because, even if a few words of input are made, these could maybe make a small difference—not earthshakingly vital, but just some nuanced tilt in favour for a more balanced perception of the healthcare system and the medical profession.

Yes, there are many government and non-government bodies and societies out there which regard the MMA as an integral part of their scope of reference, underlying the growing sense and recognition of the importance of healthcare issues in the nation.

There is that constant tug of worries about healthcare access and escalating costs for Malaysians on the one hand, versus the so-called inescapable promotion of healthcare as one critical growth engine for the economy, i.e. health tourism and liberalization, on the other.

Conversely however, and more disturbing, is the rising tide of suspicion and disquietude among many segments of the society, which are viewing the profession and doctors in general as being a tad too business-like and too 'greedy' that we cannot all be trusted unreservedly. I know this perception does not go down well with our own doctors, but we should be mindful that this is indeed something to recognise and think about...

In my many meetings with these disparate groups, one continues to sense that awe and respect for the medical professional, but at the same time, that unspoken undercurrent of suspicion that we should perhaps, be scrutinized more closely, that we be reminded that we have a socially-expected civic duty, way and above the consumer-driven business angle.

It is in this context that I have been contemplating, where and how we should position or reposition our doctors, our medical profession. The two quotations above strike me as appropriately apt when we think about our medical profession.

As exhorted by leadership guru, Stephen Covey, we must synergise and stand together, recognising that our innate differences can be tapped and moulded into a collective strength which enhances our worth, our values, not just for ourselves, but also for our patients, our *rakyat*, our nation. Sufi poet, Kahlil Gibran, on the other hand, reminds us that we are as weak or as strong as our weakest or strongest links—that our collective strength even if small may be just the tip of an iceberg of sturdiness and solidity.

Let us as a profession, choose the path of collective wisdom and moral robustness, so that we can withstand the challenges which continue to undermine our foundations. Like global warming, these torrid issues chip away at the fundamentals of our innate strength, by pitting us against each other, or with other agencies, such that we fracture asunder into seemingly irreconcilable misfits, weakening our resolve, and tarring our profession as venal practitioners of questionable ethics.

The A (H1N1) Influenza Pandemic

This pandemic is now into its post-containment phase in Malaysia, the mitigation phase. There had been weekly Wednesday meetings in Putrajaya with the DG of Health, where Dato' Dr Khoo Kah Lin and I have been attending, until mid-July when this will now be fortnightly. This National H1N1 Pandemic Task Force has been working closely with almost all relevant agencies, ministries and stakeholders, since the outbreak reached our shores in May 2009.

There was another high-powered meeting endorsed and headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, called the Pandemic Influenza Inter-Ministerial Committee (the MMA and the APHM were the only 2 other NGOs invited to sit in this body, the rest are limited to related Ministries), which underscores the seriousness with which the government views this pandemic threat.

Contrary to many who perceive that this exercise is a futile waste of funds and resources, many of us in the loop, believe that from a public health perspective, we have done relatively well in containing the outbreak with the earlier measures.



CrossTalk

'Don't sensationalise H1N1 stories'

2009/07/11

Asia Experience Tours chief executive officer Ngiam Foon and Malaysian Medical Association president Dr David K.L. Quek gave opposing views on the influenza (H1N1) issue. EVANGELINE MAJAWAT posed the questions

Q: Diseases such as dengue and HIV/AIDS have killed more people than influenza A (H1N1). Yet the attention on the flu has been intense ever since the infection broke out in Mexico. Are we over-reacting?



In a CrossTalk interview with the NST (11 July 2009) **"Don't sensationalise H1N1 stories"**, I continue to maintain that we should remain at full vigilance and preparedness, and that what we have been doing thus far, is not alarmist but necessary under the current state of infection of the A(H1N1).

As we progress from containment to mitigation phase, we must urge every citizen to remain calm but responsible so that they can help prevent even greater local spread of the infection. Personal hygiene and even voluntary social distancing is still the prudent approach even if these are inconvenient or costly from a personal or even national perspective.

But we must observe our civic responsibilities and duty if we are to face this pandemic together and come out of this with as little scathing consequences as possible. Unfortunately, the full extent of this influenza outbreak is unlikely to abate anytime soon, with most authorities believing that it would be at least a year or two before this infection makes any meaningful decline to levels of normalcy...

Of course, now it is becoming clear that even in mitigation, this flu will continue to spread in the community, but we have now been sensitized and are more prepared for it. I think our population has been educated sufficiently to cope with this, and recognise that for the little inconvenience, we may have saved a few more lives, and mitigated against a more unprecedented onslaught which could conceivably have crippled our nation. But we are still not out of the woods yet, and we have to remain vigilant and responsible.

My Health Matters blogsite & MMA Website

I have been updating my activities especially with regards the H1N1 flu in my blog, which is health and medical related. Those of you who are interested can access this at <http://myhealth-matters.blogspot.com/>. In fact, this will be my portal to all of you for statements and issues which pertain to the medical profession and health issues.

Although this is a personal blog, I can reassure all of you that my writings here will not demean or politicise our Association or our members. We are also working out a way to get some of the more direct statements out earlier in our own official MMA website, but the technical aspects need to be addressed first.

Unfortunately too, it is clear that many of our statements are not always published by the mainstream media, which have their prerogative to decide which they wish to publish. As such, some of our statements which were sent out did not materialize, and some members have complained as to why we had been silent on some of these issues—that is not the case, as I have almost always replied to any negative media slight on the profession. Again these are highlighted in my blog.

I also know that most of our members do not use the internet for news or other information, thus, I am aware that this will only reach a small minority. Nevertheless, I urge everyone to be more internet-savvy, and interested enough to engage with this new medium, so that we can all utilise this medium to the fullest extent of its near-instantaneous distribution of relevant and timely information.

NSTLive Online Chat & Debate with MPS & FOMCA

On 18 June 2009, at 6.00pm, the MMA, the MPS and FOMCA were invited to participate in the NST-Live online chat with readers. The MMA was represented by the President, and 2 PPS representatives, Dr A. Rajamohan and Dr M. Mohan.

It was an excellent idea mooted by news executive editor, Mr Lee Ah Chai, who acted as moderator. But for me, it actually proved to be quite daunting and to some degree, showed up our ineptness in this new media of instant messaging and on-the-spot responses, when compared with the MPS (Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society) which came with full force, led by the indomitable President Datuk Nancy Ho, and Past-President, John Chang.

FOMCA (Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations) was led by its President, Datuk Marimuthu Nadason. Still we managed to put some of our points across, although perhaps not with as much polish as we would like to have done. Perhaps, we can do this exercise on a regular basis (6 monthly?).



We did what we could, under the duress of time and small screen constraints (we had the tiny netbook, which makes it very trying for older eyes such as mine!).

We touched on quite a wide array of topics: some readers felt that private doctors were unprofessional for not reporting Dengue cases; some felt that the official H1N1 flu reaction was overblown; Made in Malaysia medicines were also queried; and of course there was lively debate as to whether we should separate dispensing and prescribing soon, with many 'likely' pro-pharmacists calling in aggressively to question our stand.

Of course, MPS would like to see much more independent professionalism in the dispensing of medicines, which its members feel they are sufficiently proficient and trained at doing. While they share some of our concerns regarding unscrupulous dispensing without prescription, they are adamant that we view the larger picture and stressed that the more professional amongst them could perform a better and greater service for our collective patients.

A few readers questioned our usual practice of having many school-leaving (thus, unqualified) dispensing assistants (at most clinics) to give out medicines, without the professional knowledge to advise more expertly... I did not have the time to rebut that most of us doctors would have advised and detailed such medications, their effects and side effects, even as patients leave our consulting rooms—but perhaps more realistically, this may not always be the case, in some very busy clinics...

To be fair FOMCA under the lead of Datuk Marimuthu was quite impartial, urging for more transparency and information for the consumers, i.e. the patients regarding their fees, and breakdown of charges. Of course they are very concerned as to rising costs of health care and access for the common man in the street.



We ended up being treated to a dinner at Nandos, by the MPS, where we all agreed we should be more proactive at cooperating to enhance healthcare information, quality of services, and sharing of ideas. Indeed, it is good to work together, so that we can share our common concerns and also impart our professional misgivings, so that we all can benefit mutually, for ourselves as well as for our patients and the *rakyat* out there.

Friday's 19 June 2009 NST carried the following articles:

[*Doctors and Pharmacists disagree on Dispensing*](#)

[*MMA comes to doctors' defence*](#)

[*Malaysian Medicine gets thumbs up*](#)

Thanks and Syabas to NSTLive and the team of Mr Lee Ah Chai, Ms. Annie, and Cik Shuhada! (*photos courtesy of NST*)

In summary, the MMA has been involved in many relevant and occasional mundane forums and discussions in the past few months, but this dialogue and communication must continue. I pledge to continue to serve and engage with our members and the profession to further enhance our position and our entrenched prestige.

In the meantime, I urge every member of our profession to be increasingly mindful that we all have to do our little part to ensure that we strengthen our links, and not weaken them by lapses which may be so trivial and unnecessary. Let's maintain our vocational excellence and professionalism as we interact with each and every one that we meet, our patients, their families, and even our social acquaintances—let's show our more humane and caring face!