

Medicine & Politics – Do They Mix?

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In many countries, a politician commands the least respectability whereas a medical doctor, usually the highest. The politician is usually suspected of his intentions and he may also be viewed as power-hungry, dictatorial, dishonest, cunning and self-serving. Rarely is he associated with idealism or honesty. A doctor, on the other hand, is usually regarded as a respected, compassionate individual.

The topic today “Medicine and Politics – Do They Mix” set me thinking whether Singapore MP doctors have been effective parliamentarians. How he juggles between the two contrasting roles is what many have asked me time and again. The fact that the College of Family Physicians has asked me to make this oration on this subject must be testimony to my long stay in Parliament.

This is my 5th term in Parliament and by the turn of the century I would have served 20 years as a Member of Parliament for the constituency of Ayer Rajah. You must be wondering how I lasted so long. I have been criticised and praised for my very controversial views and stand on many issues which many of you must be aware of –amongst which are issues like streaming in our schools, restructured hospitals, nominated Members of Parliament and of course, foreign talent.

I must have held the dubious honour of having been taken to task by practically every Front Bench Minister. Do I feel hurt? Of course I get wounded and at times it gets very painful. I remember my first encounter in the House with Dr Goh Keng Swee DPM in 1980. I was a new MP then and it was my maiden speech. I criticised his education system accusing him of coming up with a policy of streaming which I felt would lead to a stratification of our society and dividing Singaporeans into class divisions. This was a serious allegation and Dr Goh went to the House the next day with a newspaper cutting of what I said and blasted me so hard that I sat there speechless and wounded. It was a baptism of fire and I woke up to the realisation that politics and medicine are two different worlds.

At the end of the day, why I stayed so long is because I believe the leadership knows I have no hidden agenda and that I reflected the ordinary Singaporean’s feedback to the government. My presentation of such feedback has very often been direct, blunt and too frank and that has made the front bench members all worked up.

However, I feel politics has changed my life a great deal. I am more worldly-wise, more mature in my understanding and evaluation of things around me. I look at issues not purely from the view of an inward looking medical practitioner but from the more practical and helicopter view of a politician.

Having said all that, politics at times makes me mad and medicine keeps me sane. I enjoy seeing my patients every morning.

Let me now paint the two roles and let you judge whether the two can mix.

A doctor faces issues of life and death everyday. His decisions are usually instinctive based on well-honed skills. The results are usually apparent immediately or within days. But his influence is limited to almost a one-to-one situation.

A politician has to have a wider perspective of his wards. He has to take into account the societal context. He acts within the laws of governance and party policies. Politics embraces the whole of the social fabric and medicine is only a part of it, albeit a large concern of most people.

Doctors work hard and are not afraid of hard work. Politicians also work hard, especially in Singapore, and are also workaholics. That’s where the similarity ends. The doctor works hard for the individual but the politician works hard for the masses. A doctor’s training places the importance of the individual’s needs, i.e. patients always come first. That is why it is not unusual for doctors to prescribe treatment to a patient without cost implication and affordability.



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A politician looks at health management in a different way, eg., when an order for an extra MRI machine is made by the doctor, the politician questions such a need when he sees that the same cost for this MRI machine could be put to better use in a health prevention program to serve more Singaporeans. But the doctor is often so captured by the need to better the treatment for a few selected patients that he sometimes fails to balance the needs of his patient with that of the nation's ability to pay for all. The politician looks at the total health care delivery system and wants to know the unit health cost. This is because he has a fixed budget to spend for use by many competing health institutions.

This does not mean the politician is not sympathetic to the doctor's need. He has to weigh this need with others. He has to decide for the majority and put aside his own personal feelings for the minority. It hurts at times but this has to be the way.

Doctors generally lack exposure to general management and financial accountability. His scientific training is very biased towards his patient's medical needs. He practises in much the same way as a shopkeeper. Even if he practises in an institution, he hardly plays a significant role in management. He is thus not an organisational man, unlike the politician in Singapore.

When I became a politician I had a conflict within me – an intra-personal conflict. My doctor's training, my compassion for people was tested and stretched to the limits.

I was torn between my compassion as a doctor and what I must do as a politician. My doctor's instinct tells me that the caning of illegal immigrants is not right and pushing away the boat people back into the open sea is a thought that I didn't want to entertain. However, my political instincts tell me that I must support these policies because if I don't, this island will be flooded with illegal immigrants and boat people. Our health, social, educational and security systems will be heavily taxed leading to a possible breakdown. So in the end, my individual prejudices must be put aside and the interest of our nation must come first. This intra-personal conflict is not easy to

resolve. I guess it helps me to add a humane side to the politician's hard-headedness and firmness.

I shall now give you an insight into the work and expectation of an elected Member of Parliament. This can be categorised into within Parliament and outside Parliament.

Within Parliament, an MP is expected to attend all Parliament sittings unless he is overseas or ill and has obtained leave of absence from the Speaker. Parliament sits in the afternoon from 12.30pm to 4.30pm. This seldom happens as the meeting usually lasts way beyond 4.30pm. Parliament sits at least once a month and lasts one to three days except during the Budget and during the Presidential address debate when the sitting can last 2 weeks or so. Apart from the usual Parliament sitting there are select committee meetings and some of these meetings can stretch to as late as 11.30pm like the one I was involved in on Affordability of our Health System.

Then there are special meetings called by Government Parliamentary Committees and other Parliamentary groups. These meetings include dialogue sessions with overseas MPs. Also, there are state and official functions to attend.

As the leader of a group, like myself who chairs the Singapore-South East Asian Parliamentary group, I am expected to meet my Asian counterparts and lead delegations abroad.

Outside Parliament, there is the constituency work to attend to, like the weekly Meet-the-People's Sessions, grassroot meetings and functions including the 7th Moon Festival, Mooncake Festival, etc. You need to be away from home at least 3 nights per week.

Since the devolution of municipal matters to the MPs, we have had to organise and administer town councils. Recently, CDCs were created to enhance the development of community bonding.

As Chairman of the Bukit Timah Community Development Council, I have an added 6 constituencies to take care of and that excludes my town council work where I serve as Vice-Chairman. How effective you are at the ground



will be reflected by your performance at the general election. This is especially so if you are a single seat MP like myself. Group Representation MPs also need to work hard as you might bring down the votes of the group if you neglect your division.

In addition, there are non-parliamentary duties to perform. I am involved with the Land Transport Authority. I sit on the Executive Board planning Singapore's land transport. This takes away 2 of my afternoons every month. It is a government appointed job and not one by choice. It is of course an honour to sit on such a board. Therefore, you can see that it is not easy being an elected MP, it requires stamina and staying power and an ability to juggle many diverse roles.

So if you are also doctor-politician you have a practice to attend to, in addition to all the work as a Member of Parliament. How are you going to manage your practice, your parliamentary duties and very importantly, your family, is something you have to work out.

One of the impediments against doctors in politics is the inability to create time on his own. A lawyer can ask his client to see him later, a businessman can postpone a meeting but a doctor cannot tell his sick patient to come back later as he has to attend a meeting. So something must give way if a doctor is in politics.

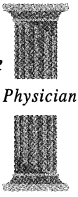
I shall use myself to illustrate how a doctor-MP copes with the sudden change in his life style. The day I got elected I ceased being a private individual. You suddenly become public property and what you say and do are under the watchful eyes of the press and those who voted for you. You are torn between your loyalty to your patients and your responsibility as a parliamentarian. I did not have a night practice but those nights were quickly filled up by numerous grassroots and official engagements. Initially, I felt lost shuttling between my practice, my constituency and home. At one stage I was tempted to give up medicine and join the government but that would mean making politics my full time career. This conflict endured for a while but my love for medicine overrode politics. To me politics is a calling and medicine is my first love. As doctor-politician,

I was faced with a dilemma. How I conduct myself and my practice will be watched by my medical colleagues. I had to avoid being accused of using my position to get patients. In Singapore, there are basically 2 types of practice i.e. contract and family practice. Contract practice involves getting contracts from companies to 'feed' the clinics and that means having to be close to company executives and CEOs and worse still, competing with your colleagues for such contracts. Invariably, if a doctor-politician gets such contracts he will be accused of being on an uneven playing field. It is true that many want to be close to a politician for whatever reasons and contracts could be given on such a basis. I decided from the very beginning that the better way out of this was to avoid contract practice and gave up what little contract practice I had and stuck to family practice. I also advise my patients from Ayer Rajah to see other doctors in case of any conflicts of interest.

With so many competing duties to perform, I had to make a swift decision. I decided to close one of my 3 clinics, took in a full time partner, and engaged 2 locum doctors to help me run my remaining 2 clinics. It was a relief though my income was halved but as I chose to take this path, I never regretted it. I wanted to do the job well and never counted the costs.

I went into politics with my eyes wide-opened at age 40 years because I had financial security and had developed a certain degree of maturity, independence and a better understanding of things around me at that age. I told myself: I do not want to die MBBS, that the world has more to offer than the 4 walls of my clinic and I wanted to see changes. I knew that if I cannot change the system from without, I have to see certain change from within. Today I am left with one clinic and a partner to help me and a very relaxed practice to contend with. I have reached a level of maturity that I am able to manage all my varied roles and prioritize my engagements. I have reached what I call a stable-state and have the confidence to take challenges better.

One of the most difficult adjustments to make in the beginning was my family life. My 2 children missed me a lot when I entered politics. My young



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son missed me at bedtime as I used to read to him. He complained to his mother that I no longer tell him Tarzan stories. My advice to those who want to enter politics is you must make sure you have an understanding wife. My ability to give my best in politics is due to my wife who has to take care of the home and the education of my children in my absence. She has done well and my 2 children have grown up balanced and well adjusted. I am very proud of them.

Since 1980, the year I entered Parliament, 8 doctors were elected into the Chamber. There are now 3 elected MP doctors, one serving his 2nd term, one the 1st term and myself doing my 5th term. Judging by this brevity of their stay in Parliament (most stay only one term), the medical profession in politics has not been very successful.

Having said all that I hope I have not frightened away would-be politicians. You ask yourself, doctors come from the cream of the school cohort yet how many can be seen and counted upon in the hierarchy of society other than those in their

own medical field. So few can be counted upon in terms of public services, in leadership roles in public and private sectors.

Why? My answer is doctors are too comfortable, they have status and financial security, they do not have much time and they are too inward looking in life.

In the beginning of my speech I said that in most countries, politicians are viewed with suspicion, disdain, etc. However, in Singapore, politicians are respected because of the high level of integrity and performance that the PAP demands of them. So a successful doctor-politician here, perhaps can claim to be almost at the top of scale of respectability. I hope this can be an inducement to those of you who have the enthusiasm and passion to contemplate joining politics.

Finally, if you do enter politics, my advice is be yourself and you cannot go wrong.

Thank you and good afternoon.