

Ethics and Regulation: A glimpse at what Singapore Medical Council (SMC) members do

by Dr Lim Khong Jin Michael, Editorial Board Member

Some of us still remember the days when SMC had phone-in elections and we could absolve ourselves from the process by keying in 00. SMC voting these days is done online and we have to choose someone even if we do not know any of the candidates or want to register a protest vote. Most of us vote for doctors whom we think will speak up for the fraternity and perhaps undertake to improve on the SMC. We then become disappointed because we do not hear much from the ones that we have voted in.

The primary reason why you may hear little of what the SMC members do is because many of the things we discuss and do are confidential. And prior to any judgment or decision, information cannot be prematurely released lest it be misinterpreted.

SMC members meet about once a month with either the committee they serve in or with the entire council. At one of the council meetings recently, we had a lively discussion on the necessity for a press release of the findings of the Disciplinary Tribunals, which we voted to do away with to avoid unnecessary media glare which can be rather unforgiving at times, but we decided to retain the uploading of these cases to the SMC website for the sake of openness and to afford an opportunity of learning for the medical fraternity.

Other than the regular meetings, Council Members will receive emails to provide information or request for decisions on average a few times a week. Inputs may be requested from the Ministry of Health, the SMC president or our secretariat.

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Needless to say, the SMC plays a key role in the investigation and disciplinary process of doctors. It is easy to be negative about the SMC because of this role that we have to fulfil. The truth is that Council Members do not relish in this role. We do understand that the public is now more inclined to raise complaints against what they feel is inappropriate behaviour or action, and the SMC investigation process is painful and worrying even for a doctor who believes that he has not done anything wrong. The investigation and disciplinary process may involve the Complaints Committee, the Disciplinary Tribunal and at times the High Court.

SMC council members are aware that the majority of doctors in Singapore practise ethically and compassionately. However, we are also regularly faced with certain challenges to the ethical standards of our profession. For our profession to grow and be respected in our society, self-regulation via the SMC plays an important role.

Having served for a year in the Singapore Medical Council, I am cognisant of the responsibilities that we carry and the hard work and efforts that many in the SMC, both elected and appointed, and the secretariat, put in. I agree that we are not perfect and our processes are still improving just like every other organisation updating its practice with time. I look forward to more willing hands joining our ranks so that we can continue to build up the standard and quality of medical practice in Singapore.

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