

# President's Column

by Adj Asst Prof Tan Tze Lee, President, 27<sup>th</sup> Council, College of Family Physicians Singapore

**2019** has been the most interesting and exciting year.

We started the year with much anticipation, as we were preparing to present a bid at the Kyoto WONCA APR conference to host the WONCA Asia Pacific Region meeting in 2023. A lot of work went into the bid preparation, which was successfully presented by our then council members Dr Xu Bang Yu and Dr Low Lian Leng. It has been 12 years since we last hosted the World WONCA Conference in 2007, and we are honoured to host the Regional Conference in Singapore again.

Life often throws a curve ball, and we learned in January 2019 of the case of Dr Lim Lian Arn and his fine of \$100,000.00 by the Disciplinary Tribunal (DT). It was a shock and caused quite the uproar amongst both the profession and the public. We heard anecdotally that some doctors, very disturbed by the decision, had stopped offering the service. Others increased their charges as they perceived that the medicolegal risks had increased. In order to find out more we, together with the Singapore Medical Association, conducted a survey to study if a "disciplinary decision can affect practice behaviour."<sup>(1)</sup> The survey results were very revealing, and showed that there were fewer private sector doctors offering H&L injections after the DT decision, and that the median price band had gone from <\$100.00 to \$100.00-\$200.00, representing a 100% increase in costs. Subsequently the courts overturned the decision of the disciplinary tribunal.

Things had come to a head, and when the College, together with the two other professional bodies, were invited to be part of the MOH Review Workgroup for SMC disciplinary process and informed consent taking standards, we accepted without hesitation. It was a privilege to take part in the review process, to reach out to our fraternity to find out the issues they faced on the ground, the challenges they faced in their different settings, and finally to come out with viable solutions to address these problems. We would also like very much to thank the many members who contributed their feedback by email, which was most helpful and very much appreciated.

After over thirty townhall meetings, attended by over 1000 doctors, we were able to glean much candid and helpful feedback, and many of these have become key elements which have been incorporated into the final report. The report has been accepted by the MOH and the next step will be the implementation stage. It was a long and exhausting journey, but well worth the effort. It was a chance for the whole medical community to come together to make a better future for the profession. In a

sense it has united all of us in the medical family and for this I am truly grateful.

One of the perennial problems SMC faces in dealing with the complaints it receives has been that of finding expert witnesses. This has resulted in great delays in complaints to be investigated and resolved in a timely fashion. In order to address this issue, the College, together with the Academy of Medicine, has agreed to help the SMC to provide timely expert witness reports. So far, we have found this arrangement to be very useful, and has confirmed to us that constructive engagement is the best way for us to be advocates for our fraternity.

With the release of the workgroup's findings and recommendations, we are hopeful that this will lead to more efficient, transparent and improved processes. However, in order to make this work we, as a body of professionals, need to step forward and contribute. Only by doing this can we help to preserve the privilege we have of self-regulation. I hope that more of us will step forward and lend a hand; then we can truly have self-regulation in our disciplinary process.

In late October and November, MOH and the College ran a series of townhalls to update our GPs and FPs on the latest initiatives of the MOH. Together with SMS Dr Lam Pin Min and senior staff at MOH, the sessions turned out to be very fruitful, and much useful feedback was also obtained from the participants. These engagements have proven to be a useful avenue to voice out problems and concerns that our GPs and FPs face on the ground, and I hope that we will have more of these feedback sessions in the future.

As the year draws to a close, it's that time of the year when work activities slow down, and our thoughts become more focused on the year end vacation. We now go glamping, climbing, skiing, trekking in far off lands like the Middle East, Iceland, South America! Christmas and New Year parties are in full swing, and many of us will be filled with festive cheer and spirit. A gentle reminder to all drivers; please leave your cars at home if you are going to have a wee nip this holiday season.

Remember, if you drink, don't drive!

Wishing all members Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

(1) <http://www.smj.org.sg/sites/default/files/OA-2019-101-epub.pdf>