

Speech by Dr Tan Chorh Chuan at the 2003 Annual Induction Ceremony of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore

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Your Excellency, Mr S R Nathan, President of the Republic of Singapore, and Mrs Nathan,
Mr Khaw Boon Wan, Acting Minister for Health
Professor Satku, Master, Academy of Medicine
Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a signal honour for me to address this distinguished gathering. I would like to congratulate the new inductees who are being admitted as Fellows of the Academy of Medicine. This is a truly exciting time for medicine and medical practitioners. Our ability to diagnose and treat diseases, and to improve the lives of our patients is increasing by leaps and bounds. There is real promise that the dramatic advances in biomedical sciences and technology will produce novel treatments and cures for many diseases that are today essentially incurable. Worldwide, there is a general confidence that science and medicine can “solve” many of the diseases and problems that afflict mankind.

Yet, almost paradoxically, amidst this general optimism, we see many disturbing trends. In almost all advanced countries, medical litigation is a big and growing problem. Studies on preventable medical errors, such as that carried out by the US Institute of Medicine, indicate that our hospitals are not as safe as we had all assumed. Today, governments and the public are less willing to allow doctors to manage themselves and their practices, as reflected by the growing trend to externally imposed schemes of regulation, audit and reporting. Throughout the world, complementary and traditional medicine is rapidly gaining popularity amongst the public, even though many of their interventions are not backed by the scientific rigor demanded of Western medicine.

There are many possible reasons for this apparent disjuncture, but at the risk of over-simplifying a very complex issue, I would like to focus on just one key area.

This key area is “trust” – trust between patients and doctors, and the trust which society has in the medical profession. Many have ascribed the seeming dissatisfaction with Western medical practitioners to the better educated, Internet-era public and overly high expectations. Undoubtedly, these are very important factors. However, we also have to recognise that there is a large element of judgement in medicine, in balancing likely benefits against possible adverse effects when deciding on the best course of management of a patient. In the end, patients and the public must have the confidence that their doctors are sincerely interested in their welfare, and are advising and treating them based on the patients’ best interests.

This trust and confidence will no longer come automatically. It has to be nurtured and earned. Our patients should not feel that specialists are only interested in their diseased organs, and not in them as whole individuals. Our patients should not have cause to suspect that unnecessary tests and treatments are being done because their doctor or the healthcare institution wants to make more money. The public should not have reason to conclude that doctors are unable to separate their commercial and financial interests from the duty they owe to their patients.

Who should be responsible for ensuring that Singaporeans will continue to trust their doctors and have confidence in the medical profession? If I took a quick poll now, I suspect that many of you would say that this is the job of the Director of Medical Services and the Ministry of Health. I don’t disagree. However, I would argue that it must be actively driven by all medical practitioners and by highly regarded professional bodies such as the Academy of Medicine.

What then should be done?

As individual practitioners, we need to adhere to high standards of professionalism and ethics. In the complex, rapidly-moving world that we live in, we need to be aware of and avoid conflict-of-interest situations. As specialists, we are important role models for the young doctors we teach and mentor. The values that we transmit in our words, and more importantly through our actions, will determine the character of Singapore medicine in the years to come.

Professional bodies like the Academy of Medicine play a critical role in shaping the nature of the debate on medical professionalism and in actively engaging society at large. Over the years, the Academy has deservedly come to be highly regarded by doctors. Its stature and credibility in society will grow even further as it takes strong, principled stands and actions on areas of medical professionalism and ethics of concern to doctors and the public.

Colleagues and friends, as a profession, we tend to direct most of our energies at clinical issues, whereas it will be the issues surrounding medical professionalism and ethics that will ultimately shape the relationship between society and doctors. In the end, this will determine if the medical profession will continue to flourish and whether we will be able to fully realise the great promise of modern medicine. I hope that this idea will provide food for thought and fuel for action which would propel Singapore medicine to even greater heights.

Thank you.

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