

Response by the Representative of Inductees, Academy of Medicine, Singapore, at the 1997 Annual Induction Ceremony-Challenges for Medicine in the Next Millennium

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The Master of the Academy of Medicine, Professor Tan Ser Kiat, members of the Council of the Academy, fellow Inductees, ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of my fellow Inductees, I would like to thank the Academy and its Council for the honour of being admitted as Fellows into the Academy of Medicine. On this solemn occasion, it is appropriate for us to take stock of the impact of the rapid changes in medicine and society on our lives as physicians and scientists. It is very easy for us to forget that although the roots of Western medicine are conventionally traced to Hippocrates, who lived more than 2000 years ago, most of the practices which are associated with modern medicine were established in the past 150 years, fuelled by an exponential growth in medical knowledge and technology, which continues to increase ever more rapidly. Hence, while the first bacteria were described by Leuwenhoek in 1683, their capacity to cause human disease was only recognised 200 years later, in the mid-eighteenth century. It was a further 80 years before the first antibiotic, penicillin, was discovered in 1929, and another 11 years later that penicillin was applied to the treatment of infections in man. Now a mere 50 years on, gene therapy has become a technical reality. Just as the industrial revolution changed the face of the civilised world, the current revolution in molecular biology will overturn many conventional medical paradigms by dramatically altering our fundamental understanding of disease and its treatment. The impact of this revolution will be amplified by the tremendous advances in the physical sciences, and information technology which will allow for rapid and widespread transmission of new knowledge throughout the world.

How do these sweeping changes impact on us as medical practitioners and scientists? Most importantly, in my view, we will have to accept that constant change will be the norm and that we would need to continuously adapt in order to remain relevant. At all levels, learning will have to shift from remembering facts and patterns of applying them, to critical analysis of scientific and medical data and their applicability. The evaluation of the relative value and desirability of new medical treatments and technology, in particular, will become an increasingly important issue. At a wider level, we would need to face up to the challenge of re-defining the role of the physician in a society where most patients will be children of the new information age, with ready access to unfiltered medical information. It is highly likely that clinical practice will have to move from being guided mainly by personal experience to being much more "evidence-based". Clinicians will also need to provide leadership and wisdom in grappling with the formidable ethical issues generated particularly by the application of genetic manipulation methodologies to human disease and procreation.

For medical institutions and for the nation, the greatest challenge is to successfully attract and retain the best clinicians and scientists, in what has really become a truly global competition. To achieve this, institutions need to create the necessary environment in which such individuals can develop and reach full potential, where research can flourish and where teaching receives a high priority. This is a difficult task, particularly in the light of the current world-wide focus on health care cost containment and the emphasis on obtaining better value-for-money for patient management. It has to be recognised that striving for the greatest cost-efficiency of clinical care delivery can have a negative impact on research and teaching.

How are these considerations relevant to our induction into the Academy of Medicine today? I submit that the high ideals which motivated the formation of the Academy in 1957 have become even more pertinent in this period of great change and opportunity. The Academy's primary objectives of fostering postgraduate and continuing medical education, of maintaining the highest professional standards and of promoting research, provide the necessary framework upon which we should continue to build in order to rise successfully to the challenges that face us in the next millennium. All of us are confident that through close collaboration in clinical care, research and teaching, the medical profession in Singapore can attain the highest possible standards.

Thank you.

28 May 1997