

Professionalism in Singapore

THE SINGAPORE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

SMA NEWS



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Deliberations on Professionalism in Singapore

The Singapore Medical Association recently hosted the IPPG-SMA joint seminar on professionalism. The IPPG stands for the Inter-professional presidents' group which has been formed in recent years for the purposes of sharing and exchanging views, concerns and issues amongst the professions.

In one of the IPPG meetings, the topic of professionalism was suggested as one worthy of the scrutiny at a joint seminar. This was the starting point of the seminar that was held on 10 June this year.

The keynote address at the meeting was delivered by Professor Tan Siang Yong, Professor of Medicine and Adjunct Professor of Law at the University of Hawaii. He is also the Director of the St Francis International Centre for Healthcare Ethics.

The SMA also availed itself at this occasion to lay the foundation stone of the Centre of Medical Ethics and Professionalism or CMEP in a symbolic way as well as to have a soft launch of the CMEP website. This made the seminar a three-in-one event.

ALTRUISM, COMPETENCE, AND THE ETHICAL DOCTOR

Prof SY Tan spoke of the symbol of the doctor. Just like the policeman has his

badge, so does the doctor - his stethoscope and white coat. And he has a pledge too. The pledge is to serve mankind by relieving pain and suffering. The challenge is to keep the badge from tarnishing and to uphold the pledge.

Of the values that make us fit the badge - altruism, duty, service, excellence, integrity and honour and many more, he spoke on three that he felt to be most important: the altruism of the servant's heart, the competence of being able to care for a person's health and the ethics that guide professional behaviour. The highlights of his address is featured in President's Forum, and the full text will be published in the July issue of SMJ.

VIEWS FROM THE PROFESSIONS

Are the professional values of our sister organisations any different? What is the health of professionalism like in an increasingly mercantile world today? These were the questions we put to the six professions in the IPPG. A representative from each of the professions was given a forward copy of Prof Tan's keynote address as background reading.

The responses from the representatives in the profession



Emblem of the CMEP.



Prof SY Tan lays the foundation stone of the new CMEP.

provided a unique opportunity to visit the professional lives of Singapore and share their pulse on the profession-mercantile relationship.

A VIEW FROM THE ACCOUNTANTS

Don Ho, speaking as the representative from ICPAS observed that it is inevitable that new times bring about new changes for the profession. Some professionals are tempted to cut corners and take short cuts to reach their ambitions. Realities of maximisation of utilisation rates, high recovery percentages and rapid collection of receivables add to the pressure of present day situation in Singapore. He agreed with Prof SY Tan that professionals must adopt ethical standards to look after their own profession. Otherwise, it would be a sad

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day when the rules would be set externally because professionals do not play the game of self-regulation.

A VIEW FROM ENGINEERS

ER Tan Ee Ping speaking as the representative from the Institution of Engineers observed that engineering is a wide and varied profession. Together they add to the comfort of everyone. They are usually neglected and not appreciated until things go wrong. Not all recognise that engineering is an art and not the exact science. There are also limits set by constraints within which that professional service was given. A quotation from WW Lawrence which he quoted underscored the message: "...We must hope that society at large will come to appreciate the capabilities and inherent limitations of science and technology, and we must hope that those in the technical world will come to appreciate the non rational nature and great subtlety of social decisions." There is clearly the importance of a mutual understanding between the public and the professional.

A VIEW FROM THE LAWYERS

Mr Sivakumar of the Law Society of Singapore, noted the similarity of professional values shared by the legal and medical professions. He noted that the challenges too are also similar. He said, "Although the symptoms may vary, the pathology or underlying cause is similar, which essentially is the commercialisation of professions..."

Ultimately, the fiduciary duty to the client must take precedence over his or her own commercial interest. This cannot be compromised."

A VIEW FROM THE ARCHITECTS

Mr Richard Ho spoke of the problems faced by the architects. The struggle to lower cost, maximise profit and uphold professional ethics and professionalism is a tough one. The "design and build" may be a good commercial idea but may undermine professionalism by making it difficult for the professional to remain independent and provide



(From left):
A/P Goh Lee Gan,
Dr T Thirumorthy,
Prof Lim Lan Yuen
(SISV), Don Ho
(ICPAS), Prof SY Tan,
ER Tan Ee Ping (IES),
Richard Ho (SIA) and
M Sivakumar (LSS).

the check and balance between professionalism and mercantilism.

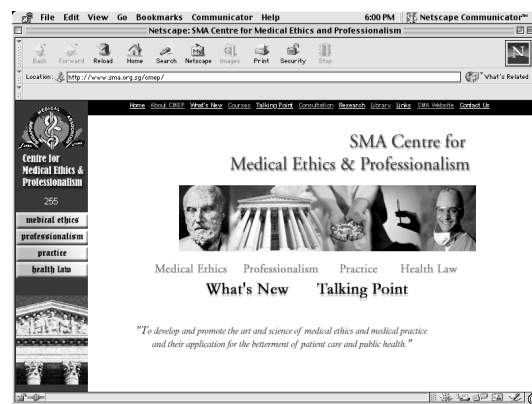
There is a need to endorse and reinforce professional and ethical values. The idea of the Award of the Year for the different professions for those who demonstrate not only competence but also altruistic ethical behaviour was suggested by Mr Ho.

A VIEW FROM THE SURVEYORS AND VALUERS

The general feeling is that the mercantile climate potentially puts the professions under siege. Yet, to use the words of Prof Lim Lan Yan: "We should not sound too pessimistic." Indeed, it is important we find a win-win situation between the professional values and conflicting commercial demands.

A VIEW FROM THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

Dr Thirumorthy, speaking on behalf of the medical profession noted that the Singapore professions need to make a badge for themselves. Free market has been embraced as a new good. Perhaps, we need to take a step back and look at the idea of connectedness. We can all do well by looking after the interests of one another. Professional and client can mutually empower one another to do a better job.



CMEP website: <http://www.sma.org.sg/cme>

FROM THE FLOOR

Many questions and comments came from the floor. There is a need for good communication and using the right words. The breakdown of professional-client relationship is a professional divorce. We need to see how that can be prevented. Love of humanity can well set the balance right again from the erosion of mercantilism. Integrity must be valued as of central importance. Accountability and responsibility for competence must be encouraged internally.

A TAKE HOME MESSAGE

A professional development programme that helps professionals find the balance in the new world of rising consumer demands, upholding of professional standards and mercantilism is needed. The consumer and the professional need to develop a connectedness to create the climate for the best outcome to occur. ■