

# We can Minimise Errors

## EFFORTS TO IMPART KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

The first intensive course on medical negligence organised by the SMA CMEP saw a participation of more than 100 doctors and medical administrators. This reflects the felt need for such courses amongst the medical profession. Prof SY Tan, Professor of Medicine and Adjunct Professor of Law was the course organizer and chief course instructor. Accolades from all participants testify to the interesting way that he conducted the entire course. Prof SY Tan will be enlarging his set of lecture notes and publishing them as a book for the Singapore practitioners. He has given SMA the copyright of the book. We are grateful for his goodwill and kind gesture.

Next year, the SMA CMEP will be organising a series of seminars on Law & Ethics. This will be held at Tan Tock Seng Hospital on every second Thursday of each month, beginning in Jan 2001. Details of the seminars are available on the SMA Website, [www.sma.org.sg](http://www.sma.org.sg).

To be forewarned is to be forearmed, so the saying goes. Medical Negligence is no exception. Medical negligence litigation is costly, complex, emotionally charged,

publicized, socially-divisive; it is lengthy, distressing, taumatizing and crippling so. Often, even when the doctor wins, he has already lost in other ways.

## SYSTEM FACTORS

Individual efforts may not be enough defence. System factors may turn out to be more important, although less obtrusive in our minds. These have been rightly called the "blunt factors" in contradistinction to individual factors which are called the "sharp factors". We are quick to blame the individual but may overlook the circumstances that are contributory or may even be crucial in preventing the doctor from committing a fatal error.

In working towards reducing medical errors, we therefore must pay attention not only to individual factors but pay even greater attention to system factors.

## PATIENT'S INTOLERANCE

There is no doubt that patients today are increasingly less tolerant of anything less than a smooth outcome. The nature of cases received at the subordinate court reflects such an attitude. Failure of sterilisation, delayed diagnosis of appendicitis resulting in the need for

two operations subsequently and incomplete removal of gallstones are now seen by patients to be good enough grounds to sue a doctor. Of course, whether they will win or not depends on whether the doctors concerned have taken reasonable actions in caring for their patients. The point however, is clear. Doctors need to be on their feet, be safe, be competent, and take reasonable precautions.

## SMA'S STRATEGY

The leadership in SMA has on its agenda, plans to empower doctors, rank and file, to prevent errors. We need to know how to practise safely and competently. We will also assist our doctors by providing the necessary advice should patient decides to sue. Finally, we will also step up the mediation work that the SMA Ethics Committee is now doing. Doctors should make sure that patients are given enough information about risks so that every consent for a procedure is an informed one. Informed patients will have less grounds to sue. A starting point for a doctor is to be better informed about medical law and ethics. We would like to see you at the Ethics Seminar next year at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. ■

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## The Restructuring of the Polyclinic Services

At the launch of NHG, the Health Minister announced that the NHG Jurong Polyclinic would be launching a pilot night clinic in January 2001. The opening of polyclinics at night will provide lower income Singaporeans the convenience of medical attention at night, instead of having to wait until the following day. Mr Lim said that "if this pilot project is successful, we will consider setting up night clinics at other polyclinics with high demand. NHG will release details of the pilot project in due course."

The objective of restructuring of polyclinic services is to facilitate the Government's effort to further expand the provision of primary healthcare services, so that lower income Singaporeans will continue to have access to good and affordable primary healthcare. The Minister assured GPs that the government has no intention of crowding them out of the primary healthcare market. The Ministry recognised the importance of improving the employment terms of polyclinics so as to attract some GPs back to work in the public sector. Twelve GPs would be joining the NHG Polyclinics from January next year.

"With the additional resources, the polyclinics will be able to improve its services to the public. They should actively expand its range and level of services. With the flexibility and autonomy they now enjoy, they should also reorganise the workflow and change the operating parameters, to provide even better services to Singaporeans."