

What do Doctors Need?

The scrutiny on doctors' mistakes and the publicity in the press received another airing in the Straits Times. The general consensus of answers from readers provides a balanced view that is reassuring to practising doctors.

NOT THE RIGHT QUESTION

It is not a question of judges relying purely on the evidence of medical experts (Bolam test) or to swing to the other extreme of judges relying on their own opinions and logical analysis (Bolitho test).

THE RIGHT SOLUTION

The solution is to work towards a mutual investment company of doctors and patients sharing a supraordinate goal, which is the containment of disease, ill-health and suffering. What doctors need is not a whip but the support and encouragement to do their best in trying circumstances. It is also important to recognise that they are fallible too. It is

only when doctors and patients are in unison that we will see the best results.

It would be interesting to reflect on what the Singapore team of doctors would do if the parents of the Siamese twins had the mindset that they would extract a pound of flesh if anything went wrong. Happily, they did not and that certainty is quite fundamental in motivating the Singapore team to do their best with the results that are so satisfying not only to the parents and the twins, but for all others who watched with some trepidation because of the complexity of the medical problem.

There are equally taxing problems in their own way that doctors face daily in their work to relieve suffering and result in a cure. What doctors need is the understanding from their patients that they are trying their best. Mishaps will occur. As one reader in the Straits Times aptly put it: "Doctors would not intentionally do harm but wrong judgements can

be made because the human body is so complicated."

WHAT DOCTORS NEED

In a nutshell, doctors need the patient's support, encouragement and forgiveness for inadvertent harms beyond their control. Doctors too have a commitment to reduce medical errors. The stratagem to achieve this is to work on the 3 Es. They stand for:

Education - To be competent, to embark on continuing improvement and not to be fearful of error and blame.

Engineering - To ensure that errors can be trapped. These are systems issues.

Enforcement - To ensure that safety rules are followed.

CONCLUSION

Doctors and patients need to deal with medical errors together. Doctors need support and understanding when things sometimes go wrong. ■