

# People Should Know When They are Conquered

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...doctors should take CME in perspective.

More CME won't kill us. So maybe we shouldn't fight so much. All these angst and resistance are futile.

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*(A clearing in a Bavarian forest. Autumn and dawn petering out.)*

*An officer asks the Roman General, "Will they fight, Sir?"*

*"I don't know," he replied pensively.*

*A galloping horse with an oddly shaped rider pierces the otherwise quiet morning. The rider is oddly shaped because it has been decapitated.*

*A barbarian chief steps out into the clearing from his concealment and shouts some gibberish. He brandishes a huge axe in one hand and holds up the decapitated head of the rider in the other. The rider was obviously the messenger of the Roman army, sent to the barbarians with an offer to the barbarians to surrender without bloodshed to The Empire. The chieftain hurls the head towards the Roman line.*

*The general, with a pained look in his eyes, whispers softly, "They say no."*

*Quintus, the second in command replies icily, "People should know when they are conquered."*

*The general replies, "Will you, Quintus? Will I?"*

*As the general leaves to mount his horse, he adds, "At my signal, unleash hell."*

*What followed was truly hell unleashed with a total rout of the barbarian hordes. The barbarians were no match for the superior firepower, tactics and discipline of the first professional army the world has ever known: the Roman Legion. Huge burning pots of oil from ballistas and flaming arrows were hurled into the hordes to soften the enemy. Infantry foot soldiers marching in step, pilum in hand, the "Roman Turtle" engaged the barbarians*

*man to man, pinning the enemy. Finally, the superior mobile Roman cavalry mauled the barbarians from behind.*

Movie buffs would know that the above describes the opening scene of the movie epic "Gladiator", starring Russell Crowe as the Roman General Maximus Desmus Meridius. Maximus was prescient when he said to Quintus, "Will you, Quintus? Will I?" Because later on, he was betrayed and his family was killed by the Roman Emperor Commodus, when Maximus refused to cooperate with the latter.

The recent issue of continuing medical education (CME) generated the usual amount of letters to the press forum and news coverage that one would expect. Of course, The Straits Time Editorial wasted no time in hurling "shame" at doctors, just as it took some unfounded offence at a certain SMA Position Paper in 2000. Oh well, we should get used to the abuse.

But why always doctors? Are there no other issues in healthcare to tackle? Why not someone else to maul and mangle for once?

I was told that in the Singapore Command and Staff College (SCSC) of SAF, they teach the rationale behind wars. Wars should only be fought when:

- a) You think you can win the war; or
- b) If you don't fight, you will surely be destroyed. So you might as well fight.

I have never been to the SCSC, so I won't know if the above is true. My apologies to SAF if what my boss told me on the above is incorrect. In any case, it makes a lot of sense.

So there will always be people who want to point their muzzles at doctors. Doctors are perceived to be rich. They profess to be caring and good (i.e. high standards to live up to). They are a small group that cannot cause much unrest (c.v. unionised labour and thousands and thousands of factory workers). Doctors are vocal, but when the crunch comes, they generally lack battlefield courage. At most, all doctors can do is to sign a lame petition (yawn). Doctors are also supposed to be smart (although with the government's talent distribution policy, doctors are not always that smart – just look at some of the arguments that get printed).

Yet, doctors are highly visible in healthcare and society.

In other words, doctors are always juicy targets to hit. What better and more convenient target than a small group of people who are supposed to be smart, rich, and nice, but do not live up to being so nice or smart? It's also a nice perception given to the public that if you solve problems relating to doctors, you can solve the problems of healthcare. Doctors are the fall guys of healthcare.

Never mind if there are other issues more pressing to solve. Pressing issues may also stir up hornets' nests. Issues like patient privacy and confidentiality standards in electronic medical records (or the lack thereof); regulation of weight loss/wellness centres, regulation of traditional medicine other than traditional Chinese medicine, overseas laboratories offering services here and masquerading as local boys; advertising

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disguised as press conferences, press statements, health talks and so on, are best left alone. Then there is the mother of all hornets' nests: The need for a means test. Not many want to understand these difficult issues, let alone solve them. Hammering highly visible doctors on stuff like CME is far easier – fight when you can win the war.

On the other hand, doctors should take CME in perspective. More CME

won't kill us. So maybe we shouldn't fight so much. All these angst and resistance are futile.

One last word: The Roman Army did not win on numbers. They were often outnumbered three to one by enemies from England to Africa, and from Spain to Persia. However, they won on superior equipment, training, tactics, and above all, Roman discipline. They fought according to a superior battle plan and held the line, which is more than I

could say generally of us doctors. We are individualistic, egotistical, ill-disciplined and lacking in strategy. Writing letters to the forum solves nothing when you are already outnumbered. Signing petitions does even less. To fight a well-prepared enemy coming in from more than one front, we need strategy, courage more desperate than our enemies, and discipline.

If not, people should know when they are conquered. ■