

Reported by Dr Chin Jing Jih, Organising Chairman, and Ms Ng Wee Fong

SMA 9th Annual Ethics Convention

The SMA 9th Annual Ethics Convention was held on 1 and 2 November 2005.

As in previous years, the programme provided a smorgasbord of lectures and symposiums aimed at raising awareness and promoting competencies in medical ethics and professionalism.

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SYMPOSIUM

This symposium, which was attended by over 150 practitioners, covered practice-related topics on death certification, email consultation, and locum employment.

Dr Cuthbert Teo Eng Swee, a forensic pathologist speaking as a member of the SMA Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism (CMEP), shared practical tips on when it is appropriate to issue the Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD), and the common pitfalls in carrying out this professional duty. Especially pertinent to practitioners was his advice to avoid issuing the CCOD for deaths, which, though from a known medical cause, are surrounded by suspicious circumstances that render them 'unnatural' and hence have to be referred to the Coroner.

This was followed by a talk on the use of emails to provide clinical consultation. Dr Jason Yap C H is also a member of CMEP's Board of Directors, and leads the SMA Workgroup on Guidelines for Clinical Email Consultation. Dr Yap spoke about the benefits and potential pitfalls in using email to communicate with patients and to provide clinical care. He suggested that the technology to ensure a reasonable level of security is available, but there is still a need to consider the impact of email consultation from the perspectives of quality of care, legal liability and practice management, as well as charging a fee for the service.

Should locums be paid CPF? "Well, as with answers to all questions, it depends", said Dr Soh Wah Ngee, an experienced general practitioner from a successful and respected general practice group. Speaking on the topic of professional relationship with locums, he defined the legal and resulting financial relationship between a locum and the clinic, and shared practical tips on making a clinic

'locum-friendly'. He also gave suggestions on how a locum doctor can be given appropriate orientation before starting work at the clinic, to help make it a win-win experience for both parties.



Dr Soh Wah Ngee

JOINT ETHICS SYMPOSIUM WITH BIOETHICS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Ethics Convention this year was the first, and hopefully of many to come, collaboration between the CMEP and the Bioethics Advisory Committee (BAC). Thanks to BAC's arrangement, Day 2 of the Convention shifted to the Biopolis, which houses the BAC Secretariat.

The joint symposium with BAC covered topics related to research and genetics. The two lectures on clinical genetics covered ethical and professional issues in genetic testing and counselling, and were therefore of interest also to medical practitioners.

The first speaker was Associate Professor Terry Kaan, who chairs BAC's Human Genetics Subcommittee. Associate Professor Kaan explored the changing paradigms in a doctor-

patient relationship faced by the doctor who, besides the doctor-patient relationship, also has a co-existing researcher-subject relationship with the same patient. He highlighted the impact of the resulting competing obligations and shared insights on how to manage such conflicts.



A/Prof Terry Kaan, Chairman, Human Genetics Subcommittee (Bioethics Advisory Committee).

The second topic was on clinical genetic testing. Dr Denise Goh, a Consultant paediatrician and geneticist with the National University Hospital, and a clinical investigator with the A*STAR, spoke about genetic information as a unique form of medical information, which in turn gives rise to privacy and confidentiality issues in genetic testing results. She also touched on the potential benefits and pitfalls of direct access to genetic testing without the guidance of a clinician or geneticist.

“... avoid issuing the CCOD for deaths, which, though from a known medical cause, are surrounded by suspicious circumstances that render them ‘unnatural’ and hence have to be referred to the Coroner.”

Genetic counselling is a process whereby patients and their families are evaluated on the possibility of having a hereditary condition. Using hereditary breast cancer as a model, Dr Lee Soo Chin, a Consultant with the Department of Haematology-Oncology at the National University Hospital, described the indications for and the process of genetic counselling, focusing on its limitations, benefits and disadvantages, and potential social and ethical implications.

The symposium, despite being held on a Sunday afternoon, attracted the enthusiastic participation of over 50 practitioners and researchers. The interaction during the 40-minute Question and Answer Session was lively and thought-provoking, a definitive indication that the symposium had successfully attracted its target audience. It is hoped that this will be the first in many collaborative efforts between SMA and BAC in promoting professional interests in bioethical issues.

INTERACTIVE FORUM ON ROLE OF FAMILY IN MEDICAL DECISION-MAKING

This forum was targeted at doctors, nurses, case managers, medical social workers and allied healthcare professionals who, in the course of providing patient care, interact regularly with family members. The main objective of the forum was to explore the appropriate role of family members in making treatment decisions for adult patients who are still in possession of adequate decision-making capacity.

Led by a panel of professionals, there was a lively exchange of views and experiences between panelists and audience on challenges faced in advocating the patient’s best interests and preferences in our family-oriented society. The professionals included:

- 1) Dr Chin Jing Jih, a Consultant Geriatrician with Tan Tock Seng Hospital, and Executive Director of the SMA Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism
- 2) Dr Toh Han Chong, Consultant Oncologist with the National Cancer Centre
- 3) Ms Goh Soon Noi, Manager of Medical Social Services at Changi General Hospital
- 4) Dr Tang Hui Kheng, a Consultant Psychiatrist with Tan Tock Seng Hospital

- 5) Ms Masrita Ramli, a Nurse-Clinician and Disease Manager with Tan Tock Seng Hospital
- 6) Ms Kuah Boon Theng, a lawyer experienced in local health law and medical ethics

At the end of the discussion, which ended only because of time, some consensus was arrived at. While it was acknowledged that upholding the patient's autonomy is important, where appropriate, the family should be allowed to participate in the decision-making process, short of having similar rights of consent as the patient. This is particularly when family members'

support and assistance are needed to help the patient achieve his or her therapeutic goals. An understanding of a family's unique values and dynamics through good communication is therefore instrumental.

In all, the Convention was a successful event. We wish to express our sincere appreciation to Clinical Professor Chee Yam Cheng, the BAC Secretariat, all speakers and audience for their invaluable time and effort. It is the hope of SMA and CMEP that each participant, speaker and audience alike, would have something to take away from the programmes, ultimately improving the general level of professionalism and quality of patient care. ■