

By Dr Lee Pheng Soon, SMA President

# When was the last time you, as a GP, saved somebody's life?



Dr Lee Pheng Soon, BSc (Hons), MBBS (1982), FFPM, MBA, has worked full-time as a pharmaceutical physician and part-time as a GP since 1985. He is Honorary Fellow in Human Nutrition at the University of Otago, New Zealand. The main weakness that he will confess to, relates to moderate amounts of the beautiful Central Otago Pinot Noirs.

Two Sunday mornings ago, a 30-year-old China National was rushed to the clinic by his factory supervisor, after an accident lacerated his forearm so badly that blood continued to pulse out through the 'Good Morning' towel he so desperately clamped to the wound with his good hand. A tourniquet from a triangular bandage, a drip set up, and insistence that he lie still until the ambulance arrived, was all I could offer. At least three of my waiting patients told me later that they were convinced that swift action had saved this poor man from bleeding to death. He had arrived very pale, and the blood he left outside the clinic entrance and in the waiting area had literally formed puddles. Who knows how much more blood he had lost in the pickup truck on the way to the clinic.

I sat for a while collecting myself as the ambulance wailed off. My mind flashed back to three other times when I might possibly have saved, or lost, a life.

The first was when I, a 17-year-old student, had plunged into the sea off a beach on Pulau Tekong Kechil, to pull back to shore a non-swimmer classmate who had suddenly 'stepped off' a waist-high shelf while wading, and found herself standing on tip-toes in throat-high water. I was physically fit, and had just won my Lifeguard

Corps 'Distinction Award', but the sea between Pulau Tekong Kechil and Tekong Besar was very different from the school's swimming pool. The tidal current flowing in this narrow channel kept pulling both of us out to sea. It took maybe twenty minutes of desperate swimming before I could tow her, inch by inch, for ten yards back to where we could stand again in waist-high water. At least, she stood. I was bent over, supported by another two classmates, retching salt water. I think we almost died that day, the both of us.

As a Houseman in Toa Payoh Hospital's medical department, I saw a patient sitting in bed get his second heart attack in eight days, while he was eating his lunch. He had just been disconnected and wheeled out of the ICU to the general ward, next to the nurses' station, an hour ago in preparation for discharge. His hand simply let go of the bowl of *mee siam*, his eyes rolled up, and he flopped backward, absolutely atonic. I shouted for help, started CPR, and when VF was confirmed by ECG, the Trainee MO (I believe it was Koh Tian Hai) used the defibrillator. It took just three tries, and he was back to sinus rhythm. I can never forget what happened next. Less than a minute later, he sat up by himself, looked around him, saw his family and said in English, "Good, you are here, I get discharged today."

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Even before the days of TV shows like *Chicago Hope* and *ER*, everybody present in the ward, medical staff, families and patients alike, knew that just minutes ago, he had almost died.

Several years later, on the first evening of my first ever visit to Seoul, I decided to clear my head from a turbulent flight by going shopping with my boss. From the divider of the major road, I saw that there were no cars, and stepped off to cross. A strong hand seized the back collar of my winter jacket and literally spun me around, off-balance, back to the divider. Immediately the whoosh from cars brushing by at full speed told me "Fool! You checked only one – the wrong – direction for traffic." When we reached the other side, Seet Lip Chai quietly said, "Eh, you don't like working with me, or what, hah?" I am certain that I would have probably died a painful death that day.

Sitting at my desk now, I think about how so many of our colleagues, junior or senior alike, save lives and limbs on a regular basis in hospitals. But as GPs, such an opportunity is very rare. True, we sometimes make diagnoses that

save lives and limbs, but if we did not, sooner or later somebody else would as the signs become more florid. When the opportunity to save a life comes, a combination of several factors must be in place – adequate theoretical training, your physical presence, and the right equipment – or the life is lost. The most likely scenario for a GP is probably cardiac arrest, and GP clinics located right in the heartlands are ideally placed to make a difference during the few minutes between onset and when it is too late to do anything. CPR training and an automated external defibrillator (AED) will make the difference between saving and losing such a case. If you are a GP, would investing a few hours for the former, and roughly two to three thousand dollars for the latter, be too much to be ready to save a life, when it is your turn?

A group of doctors have put together an initiative called 'Heart Safe Singapore'. The SMA supports their initiative, and will try to see if we can do anything to reduce the equipment cost. We urge you to step forward and prepare yourself, and your GP clinic, for the time when you will count towards saving one person's life. ■

## Seminar on Cardiac Arrest Management: The Essentials

**Date:** Saturday, 7 January 2006

**Time:** 2:00 to 5:00 pm

**Venue:** Auditorium, College of Medicine Building, College Road, Singapore

### Programme:

*All to be seated by 1:50 pm*

- 2:00 pm Arrival of Guest-of-Honour
- 2:05 pm Welcome by MC, Dr Rabind Charles
- 2:10 pm Introduction by President, SMA, Dr Lee Pheng Soon
- 2:20 pm Speech by Guest-of-Honour
- 2:30 pm 'Singapore Pre-hospital Cardiac Arrest Data' by Dr Marcus Ong
- 2:40 pm 'CPR – How To Do It Right' by A/Prof Lim Swee Han
- 2:50 pm 'Automated Defibrillation – How To Do It Right' by Prof V Anantharaman
- 3:00 pm 'CPR + AED Together – The Life Multiplier' by Prof V Anantharaman
- 3:10 pm Video Show and Demonstration on CPR + AED
- 3:20 pm Tea Break
- 3:50 pm Practical Teaching on CPR + AED
- 4:30 pm Panel Discussion
- 5:00 pm Close

*Organised by: Singapore Medical Association (SMA) & Heart Safe Singapore (HSS)*