



President's Welcome Address

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

Good evening, Minister Ong Ye Kung, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends. Tonight is very meaningful for me – it is the first and only SMA Annual Dinner that I will be hosting as SMA President. Having managed to avoid making an annual dinner speech for 2020 and 2021, I cannot put it off anymore.

Taking on the mantle of SMA President – and being the first woman to do so – in early 2020, right around the start of the COVID-19 pandemic threw the SMA Council and Secretariat into a figurative warzone. We had to adapt quickly, and all the various healthcare leaders had to come together as a team immediately. The professional bodies, hospitals and Ministry of Health had to coordinate responses and get accurate ground feedback.

Many of you here were involved in those initial meetings, around the Lunar New Year period of 2020. We projected the healthcare impact and planned for the downstream logistics

and medical equipment support needed for frontline healthcare workers. After close to three years, with all its ups and downs, I think we are all seasoned veterans now. I thank the SMA team for their strong, unwavering support in many of the initiatives: setting up Telegram support chats, having dedicated pages for COVID-19 and mental health resources, and co-hosting some of the Zoom engagement talks on COVID-19-preparedness, telemedicine and vaccines.

One additional role in these past two years was my appointment as a Nominated Member of Parliament, supported by the SMA and Academy of Medicine, Singapore. The SMA Council was initially worried about potential conflicts of interest, or that I would not have time for the role, but the final consensus was that the two positions could be complementary. It was a rigorous selection process among 61 applicants, which concluded with a

viva-like interview by the Special Select Committee of Parliament. I have tried my best to speak on relevant and timely issues for the profession, in addition to providing representation on various committees, in particular the Multilateral Healthcare Insurance Committee. Thank you all for your trust, and I hope that I have managed to make some positive difference. You may not believe me, but I do not like being in the limelight, nor do I like remaining under the scrutiny of the public eye – especially the unforgiving and fickle opinions of netizens! But I believe it was something that had to be done.

As an individual, one may not be able to achieve much, but when one is part of a larger whole, we can all do a lot more together. I have been on the SMA Council since 2008; that's 14 years and almost my entire career as a doctor. I have seen what the seniors before me have achieved, and I see how much more we can do. SMA's slogan – "For Doctors, For Patients" – has never been more important than now, and doctors and staff alike have placed "service before self" as our guiding principle.

I list three key strategies in how we work, to achieve the most we can: Engagement, Collaboration and Trust. I have made parliamentary speeches, written monthly columns and given talks centered around these three strategies. I have found that no matter how complex the situation is, take the time to engage, collaborate and build trust; the lasting relationships built will stand the test of time, and will help in overcoming future obstacles.

Somedays, I wake up feeling like it is a challenging time to be a healthcare worker. The multiple stressors are enough to make anyone think of quitting. Unreasonable demands from ungrateful patients and families, the reliance on Dr Google and badly written Search Engine Optimised articles, lack of gratitude and appreciation from everyone, and so many personal sacrifices and health risks. And yet – yet, most of us persevere. Today's book launch brings you snippets of reflections from healthcare workers, beautifully illustrated panels by Mr Josef Lee, and it sheds some light on the spirit of why we serve.

To those of us who are going through dark times, to the young doctors and nurses who are angry and ranting on social media, to anyone suffering right now if you are angry with the way that things are, good. Stay angry, but don't let it burn you out. Learn to channel the flames and refine it – use it for the greater good. I was an angry young doctor, and I'm an angry middle-aged aunty now, and likely going to be an angry old doctor.

Look at the larger picture – national, and even international changes, can have rippling effects on us and our daily practice of medicine: global politics, economic developments, changes in social norms. If we as seasoned clinicians stay silent about the downstream

impacts we foresee, we have no choice but to accept the consequences. It is not effective to just be muttering among ourselves or use WhatsApp and Facebook to voice personal opinions, demanding change. Friends, that's not how systemic change happens. Come join a committee, speak up, engage and collaborate.

Don't allow the winds of change to throw us about, keep our direction true, and know how to move with the wind.

I have talked about the need to reclaim the doctor-patient relationship. As the practice of medicine gets more complex – with free access to Internet knowledge, artificial limitations set up by insurance companies, and practical concerns about costings – it is indeed our burden to figure out how best to help the patient in front of us, while factoring in all of the above. Like it or not, it is naive to think that medical school fully prepared us for the practice of medicine. Even working in a restructured hospital may not quite open our eyes fully. It is only when you step into private practice and run your own business that one really sees the hard knocks of the real world, and how dollars and cents influence health-seeking behaviours.

I look to everyone to be a leader in your own circles of influence – how you run your hospital, your department and your team. How you treat the staff, how

you motivate them. How do you interact with other stakeholders? Do you see them as adversaries, or as true partners? I subscribe to "Hanlon's razor" which states, "never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity". Perhaps stupidity is too harsh, ignorance is a better word. So, the next time, in a large group meeting, and that one irritating fellow keeps arguing with you and refuses to see your point, take a deep breath, smile, and ask, "How may I help you to understand me better?"

If you are an SMA Member, I hope that you will encourage colleagues to sign up as members – the more members we have, the louder our collective voice. Of all the professional memberships available, the SMA is the most inclusive and frankly, the cheapest at only \$200 a year before GST – that's 60 cents a day!

Enough about promoting SMA and learning how to advocate.

Tonight is a night for celebration, for having weathered through the worst of COVID-19, and emerging stronger as a profession.

Tonight is a night for friendship. It is said that "hard times reveal true friends", and all of you here have proven true!

Join me in a toast, for tonight, the SMA celebrates our friends. "Cheers!"

Enjoy the evening. ♦



The 63rd SMA Council with Minister for Health Mr Ong Ye Kung and distinguished guests