

# A Thousand Miles and Beyond

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

My goodness. It felt like just yesterday when I wrote my first President's Forum column for *SMA News* in May 2020. If you search the *SMA News* article archive, I appear in 176 results! These are mostly editorials written during my terms as editor, followed by current presidential columns and lastly, various articles written through the years.

It has been three years. People may not quite realise how much of my time was given towards advocacy for doctors and patients. I tell my friends that I now have 0.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) units for clinical work and 0.5 FTE for administrative work! For the record and for my own accounting, these are some of my achieved milestones over the past few years: I started my private practice; I was elected as SMA President, which led to my appointment in the Multilateral Healthcare Insurance Committee (MHIC); I was subsequently nominated and appointed as a Nominated Member of

Parliament (NMP); and then appointed as a member of the Singapore Medical Council (SMC) in July 2022.

My regular engagements included SMA's monthly Council meetings, committee meetings and various networking events, talks and seminars; Parliament sittings, additional briefings by various groups and ministries; and SMC meetings. There were some weeks where I would not see my children for almost the whole week, having only Sundays together.

## Was all the sacrifice worth it?

So many things have happened, yet it sometimes feels like nothing has changed. However, one must not lose heart. This is a good time to take stock, take a step back and look at the big picture, and celebrate the many achievements that we have collectively accomplished.

The day-to-day stresses and challenges of the workplace seem to still be ever-present: unhappiness, perceived unfairness in business practices and in insurance empanelment, bullying and harassment from colleagues, from patients, from their families...

Yet, we have made some big, significant steps at the national level:

- (1) April 2021: Formation of the MHIC, with the resulting formation of extended panels.
- (2) December 2021: Establishment of the National Wellness Committee for Junior Doctors.
- (3) March 2023: Minister for Health's affirmation of the Tripartite Workgroup for the Prevention of Abuse and Harassment of Healthcare Workers' findings and recommendations to have a zero-tolerance policy against abuse.

Each of these accomplishments came about due to the combined efforts of many players, and for these to be effective, the players will need to work together and be aligned in their goals. There are a lot more ongoing developments in the private sector, and only time will tell how these developments may roll out.

### Step forward, change the future

*"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."* – Mother Theresa

In my various leadership roles – as SMA President, as an NMP, and as an appointed member of SMC – I have cast many stones. Some sank and some may have broken windows and ruffled feathers, but I hope that some have created a few ripples and inspired others to be leaders and agents of change.

As the world moves towards normalcy and declares that the worst of the pandemic is over, it is a time to rejoice and to appreciate our renewed freedom. But, as I have said before, individuals have short memories.

The public may forget, but the healthcare community cannot afford to. There will be another pandemic and another communicable disease. The profession must endure, and organisations and governments cannot be complacent.

It is not my role to tell others what to do, but this is what the SMA is strong in. The SMA Council has an amazing institutional memory, with archives of newsletters, verbal histories from long-serving members and an incredible network across healthcare and allied health industries.

This issue celebrates the rich history and relationships that SMA has nurtured and developed over the years. I have always asked for more active engagements from our Members, and for more help in recruiting non-Members. The SMA is only as strong as its Members, and we will only get what we put in. No matter how junior you think you are or how young you are, you can be a change leader and an advocate for the groups you care about.

For my final words as President, may I leave you with: "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step." ♦

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice in mid-2019, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.



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