

SMA NEWS



Volume 45 No. 3 March 2013

MCI (P) 211/01/2013

SMA Lecture 2012

Euthanasia: A Matter of Life or Death?

9 March 2013

Lecturer

Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon

Chief Justice Menon delivering the SMA Lecture 2012



SMA Lecture 2012

By Denise Yuen

The annual SMA Lecture was instituted in 1963 and its themes are centred on medical ethics and related topics. SMA Lecturers are appointed by invitation from the SMA Council, and the lectureship is awarded in the main to eminent and distinguished persons who have made significant contributions to Medicine and the community, and who have much to teach and share with the medical profession.

The SMA Lecture 2012, Euthanasia: A Matter of Life or Death?, was held on 9 March 2013 at Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel Singapore. It was delivered by Mr Sundaresh Menon, who was sworn in as Singapore's fourth Chief Justice in November 2012. An audience of about 200, comprising mainly doctors and lawyers, were in attendance.

It started with a welcome address delivered by SMA President A/Prof Chin Jing Jih, who gave a brief history of the SMA Lecture. He noted that in the initial years of the SMA Lecture's inception, the Lecturers were selected from the SMA membership. In 1983, SMA recognised that wisdom could come from outside the association, and invited Dr M K Rajakumar from Malaysia to become the first non-SMA member to give an SMA Lecture. His lecture was titled Ethical Consequences of Technological Changes. In 1989, Singapore High Court judge Justice P Coomaraswamy became the first non-doctor to become an SMA Lecturer, and his lecture was titled Law and Medicine.

A/Prof Chin revealed that when Chief Justice Menon accepted the SMA Lectureship, SMA originally offered him the option of "safe" topics, like mediation and arbitration in medico-legal disputes, or informed consent. A/Prof Chin commented that he was "extremely delighted" when Chief Justice Menon proposed the topic of euthanasia instead, which A/Prof Chin "gladly accepted". A/Prof Chin opined that despite the medical profession's "deep apprehension and professional objection towards euthanasia", they will soon be "compelled to engage in public discussion of legal,

social and ethical considerations surrounding this topic". He emphasised the need for medical professionals to be clear and familiar with the arguments regarding euthanasia, its definition and forms, its practice in other countries, and its implications in a rapidly ageing society.

This was followed by a citation for Chief Justice Menon, presented by Dr Chong Yeh Woei, 1st Vice President, SMA (see page 6). Chief Justice Menon and Dr Chong were schoolmates in junior college, where they played rugby together.

Chief Justice Menon spoke at length about euthanasia, which he defined as an action that results in the immediate merciful killing by a doctor of a sick and suffering patient who has consented to this action, and is the deliberate and very humane ending of a patient's life to prevent further suffering, resting on two fundamental principles: autonomy and mercy.

To work through the ethical difficulties of euthanasia, he proposed unravelling three thematic strands, on the nature of human rights, the interaction between law and science, and the potential implications for policy. He also examined the status of euthanasia in Singapore and other countries, including Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK and the US. He opined that the impetus that drives change on a profoundly ideological matter like euthanasia should "ideally come from within the very own political community of those directly affected", and not the courts. He concluded that it would be "presumptuous and certainly unfeasible" for him to provide answers to the challenges he mentioned, but drew out a few broad points of interest which he felt would spark continuous discussion of the topic. (For the full text of Chief Justice Menon's lecture, please refer to page 7.)

After Chief Justice Menon had delivered his lecture, A/Prof Chin presented him with a token of appreciation, and the SMA Lecture 2012 closed to tremendous applause. **SMA**

There was a full house at the lecture

