



Providing Healthcare from the *Heart*

By A/Prof Chin Jing Jih

AT THE Law Society's recent Annual Dinner and Dance, the legal profession celebrated its *pro bono* spirit and reaffirmed its commitment to ensure access to legal services for those in need. Fundraising activities went on in the background; and up on stage, a lawyer was presented with an award that acknowledged his outstanding contributions in *pro bono* legal services. Since 2007, the Law Society also has a Pro Bono Services Office that manages and develops its *pro bono* programmes. According to the society's website, its over 3,050 members each pledge 25 hours per year, translating into "a potential bank of more than 80,000 *pro bono* hours to invest for the good of the community in Singapore".¹ In fact, *pro bono*, a generic term for professional work undertaken voluntarily and without payment or at a reduced fee as a public service, has become so strongly associated with lawyers that many have erroneously assumed it to be a reference reserved exclusively for the legal profession.

I am aware that comparison is inevitable in Singapore, and one might reasonably ask, "What about the medical profession?"

It is my belief that while the term *pro bono* has not been as regularly used in association with the medical profession, it certainly does not mean that there are no charitable or voluntary medical services provided at either no or reduced fees for needy patients. Part of the reason why physicians' *pro bono* work is not as widely recognised could be due to the profession's lack of a centrally organised *pro bono* programme that is as structured and visible as that of our legal counterparts.

Contributing locally and internationally

However, doctors are already providing *pro bono* medical services both in and out of Singapore in their own quiet ways. For example, it is common knowledge that many doctors waive their professional fees when they come to know that their patients have financial difficulties. Some even extend the assistance to include supplying medications free of charge from their own dispensaries. Nonetheless, such waivers of medical fees are not centrally coordinated, and unlike government subsidies, they are not based on any formal means testing. Each practitioner has their own way of deciding who is in need of help and what the quantum should be. Thankfully, such *pro bono* services have not been made mandatory by any statute or professional code, and they continue to be ideals and virtues that doctors uphold voluntarily and according to their own conscience. These

pro bono services have undoubtedly earned the medical profession much respect and goodwill from patients and society in general.

In addition to professional fee waivers, doctors in Singapore have also found a variety of ways to express their generosity and selflessness. A number of doctors, together with their allied healthcare colleagues, have been regular volunteers in medical humanitarian work, which include providing medical aid at sites affected by natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. These doctors hail from both the private and public sectors, and from all ranks and files. They, along with other healthcare workers, brave the hazardous and challenging conditions during and sometimes immediately after a natural disaster, in the hope of bringing valuable and much-needed medical expertise and resources to mitigate human sufferings and reduce the mortality rate.

There are also doctors who participate in short term medical missions in less acute but no less important circumstances. These humanitarian teams bring essential medical aid and relief to areas where healthcare is less developed. In the longer term, they also assist in building healthcare infrastructure to raise the medical and public health capabilities of these less privileged communities. Some of the volunteers include teams of surgeons who work with local healthcare authorities in the area to provide and develop local capacity in treatments like cleft lip surgery, general endoscopy and eye surgery for vision restoration. For many of these less developed areas, pulses of short term assistance are also complemented by efforts in providing longer term and concomitant improvement in public health standards.

To encourage volunteerism and humanitarian work among the profession, medical schools in Singapore are developing programmes in global health and specific public health issues to help equip those who are interested in carrying out such medical missions with the relevant competencies and engagement skills needed to achieve fruitful long term collaborations. In addition, there appears to be gradually more local employers, particularly healthcare institutions, which are showing their support for humanitarian projects by granting their staff unpaid and even unrecorded leave for these trips. This is an encouraging sign. Credit should also go to those medical workers who stay behind in Singapore, willingly and diligently covering the duties of their absent colleagues.

One notable recent event in Singapore perhaps gives further indication of the commitment by our local healthcare institutions and professionals to humanitarian and volunteering work – the inaugural International Conference on Humanitarian Medical Missions. Organised by Singapore General Hospital and held in October this year, the conference brought together physicians, nurses, dentists, allied health professionals and support personnel from various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) interested in humanitarian work, so that they might interact and exchange views and experiences about these volunteer missions. The conference also served to draw public attention to these humanitarian missions and highlight their scope among the healthcare communities. The conference organisers expressed hopes that the conference will “enhance the spirit of volunteerism and encourage physicians and healthcare professionals across borders to work for a better and more peaceful world”.

Meanwhile, closer back home, we must not forget the doctors and healthcare professionals who generously avail themselves to pro bono services for our local community. For example, numerous doctors volunteer their time to serve without remuneration in various capacities for professional and healthcare-related committees under both government agencies and professional bodies. These doctors provide valuable professional insights and feedback that facilitate the formulation of sound healthcare policies, professional guidelines and action plans. Some also serve in voluntary welfare organisations and NGOs that run subsidised or free healthcare services, while others serve in health advocacy groups linked to specific diseases. There are also a group of dedicated voluntary doctors who serve home-bound patients who are either in need of home medical or hospice care.

Another group that I would like to give special mention to are those who have volunteered their time and expertise, many in terms of years and decades of service, to the various continuing medical education activities, and on committees for professional bodies such as SMA, the Academy of Medicine, Singapore and the College of Family Physicians Singapore. Many of the visions and missions of these professional bodies would not have been made possible without the selfless attitudes of these volunteers. By enhancing the professional development of fellow doctors, they are indirectly volunteering to bring about improved treatment and healthcare quality for our patients.

Acknowledging altruistic doctors

The impact that these voluntary doctors’ efforts create on the healthcare landscape and society in general is hard to measure and ascertain, though one can easily assume that they are significant and life-changing. Based on that, we should be grateful and appreciative of their hard work. I suspect that the medical profession probably prefers to continue the current model of voluntary services. We are assured that as long as we inculcate the right values in our medical education and training, and select the right people to enter the profession, the flame of generosity and spirit of volunteerism will be values that continue to define our medical profession.

In recent years, there has been a disproportionate amount of reprimand by the media, netizens and in other forums of public opinion for the misdemeanours committed by a few members of the profession. But we should not forget that there are also an overwhelming number of doctors who are keeping our flags flying high by steadily providing voluntary medical services to the underprivileged both in Singapore and overseas. I have from time to time personally encountered doctors who belittle or pass cynical remarks at altruistic acts of their colleagues. It is my plea that those who, for whatever legitimate reasons, are unable to volunteer their medical expertise, will at least support their comrades and acknowledge their invaluable contribution.

On behalf of SMA, I would therefore like to express my deepest gratitude to all these altruistic doctors, as well as to other healthcare professionals, who have continued to make the impossible possible and offer comfort and hope to those who are still suffering. I am also grateful that these exemplary doctors have become the much-needed positive role models to future generations of doctors and medical students.

Here’s wishing all a blessed Christmas and a fulfilling 2015 ahead! ■

Reference

1. *The Law Society of Singapore. About us. Available at: <http://probono.lawsociety.org.sg/About-Us>. Accessed 1 December 2014.*



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