

“HI DOCTOR, may I ask you a couple of questions? First, I would like to be a doctor. But I want to be a doctor who sees the patient as a whole person, and I do not see any doctors doing that.” A 14-year-old boy approached me after my message at a church meeting over the recent Easter weekend.

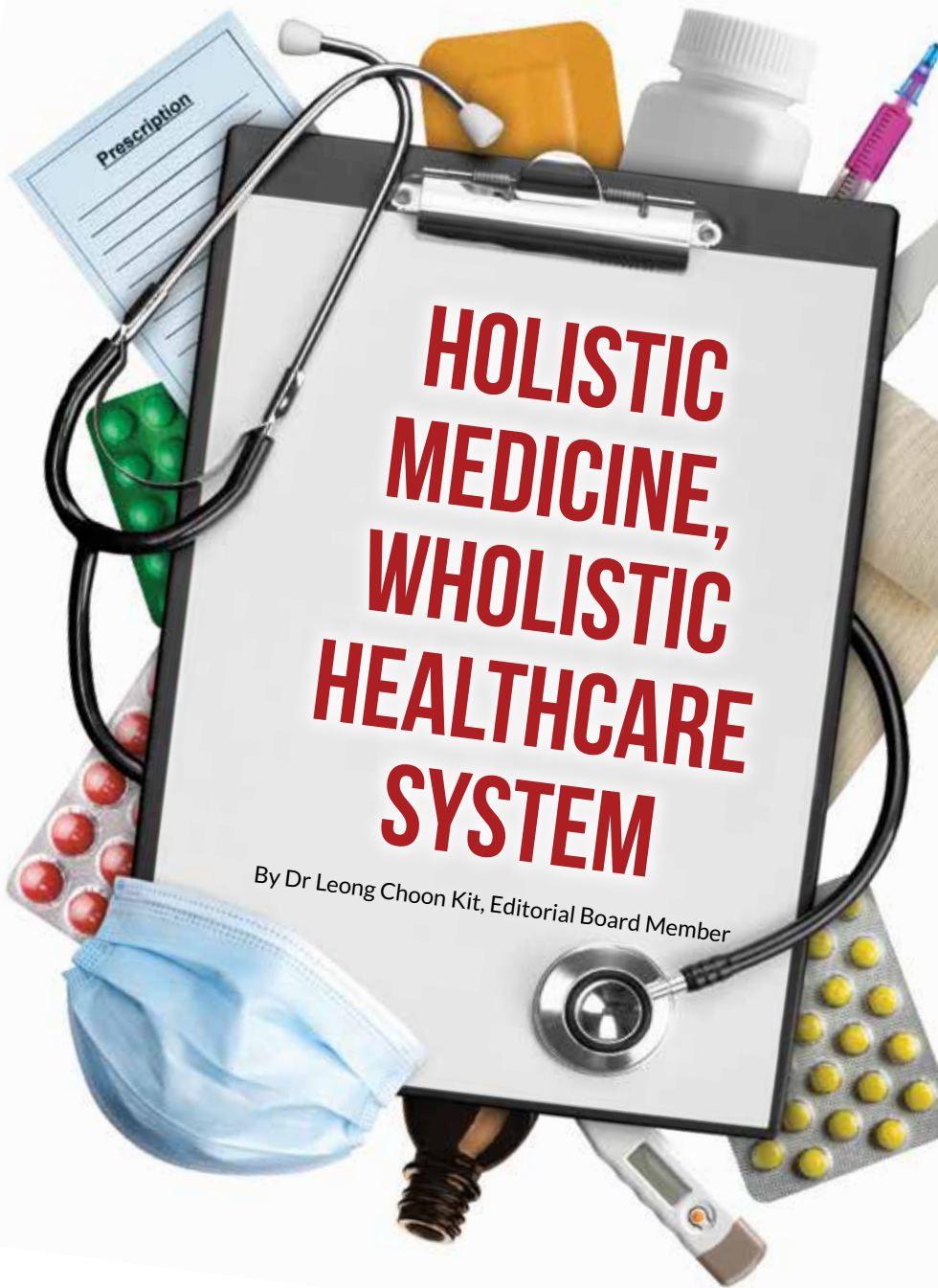
In my mind, I was originally very tempted to respond by defending our profession. On second thought, I decided against it. Upon reflection, I realised that modern medicine is perceived as direct and cold with instant results. It is often accused of ignoring the patient holistically, including their emotional and mental states. We are also blamed for ignoring prevention and non-pharmacological management.

However, this is certainly far from the truth. We were not taught that way in medical school. So, what are the reasons behind this impression?

Overcrowded healthcare system

The first and main reason I can think of is because doctors are overworked. It is a well-known fact that our public institutions are overwhelmed. We need to work faster, more efficiently and more effectively. The same happens in the private sector. We need to see more patients in order to earn enough to pay the rent, staff and operational costs.

That brings us to the second point. Fees at private clinics are not high enough to allow GPs to see patients slowly. Competition forces GPs to charge cheap. The fear of not getting enough patients from the neighbourhood forces GPs to take up contracts that pay even lower fees. Some of our colleagues even attempt the impossible by trying to match polyclinic prices.



Unintended effects of subsidies and policy

Yes, subsidies are definitely needed for many Singaporeans. Our public healthcare institutions are certainly good value for money. Besides affecting the private GPs adversely in the way they see patients, the attractive subsidies move many (including well-to-do Singaporeans) over and overwhelm the limited facilities.

In order to keep up with the services, mundane chores like dressing, nebulisation, doing ECGs, taking blood, performing developmental assessment, diet and exercise counselling have been taken over by allied health professionals, allowing the family physicians at the polyclinics to focus on the parts of the body that are in trouble.

With the introduction of free childhood vaccination at the

polyclinics, GPs in the private sector are now deprived of the opportunity to vaccinate and perform developmental assessment. They are being deskilled in the process. Now GPs are not involved in preventive medicine, pushing them to focus on parts of the body instead of the entire person.

Uniqueness of Singapore

As Singapore is a small and affluent country with accessible healthcare facilities, our patients have a plethora of choices. They can make appointments to see any specialist and subspecialist directly after self-diagnosis with the help of Google. This is how efficient and effective our healthcare can be, provided the search engine is accurate. And the more accurate the diagnosis, the more the public will misconceive that doctors in general are only interested in a particular part of their body and not the person.

Unfortunately, Google is more off target than spot on when it comes to diagnosis. I have patients who self-refer to cardiologists for chest pain. After spending thousands of dollars on multiple tests and visits, they are informed that there is nothing wrong with them.

That reminded me of an American missionary I saw a few years ago.

"Doc, I have chest pain, affecting breathing on and off for the last two months. Occasionally, I break out in a cold sweat," Amy (not her real name) related. "I have seen two specialists, one for the heart and another for the lungs, and both told me I am perfectly well after a battery of tests. What should I do?"

With perfect hindsight, I am sure all of us would start to look elsewhere and would easily suspect reflux

oesophagitis as the cause.

So where lies the fault? In one sense, no one is really at fault. Everyone is doing the right thing. Yet in another sense, there could be a better solution.

If only the public had consulted their GPs first, before going to the specialists.

If only they had gone to the right specialists based on the recommendation of their GPs, after careful and deliberate consideration.

If only there were ways in our system to facilitate such behaviour. If only... the list goes on.

That reminded me of a dirty joke. One day, the nose and the mouth were arguing with one another. "I am more important than you. If I close myself, the body will not be able to eat and it will die of starvation after a few

weeks," the mouth told the nose.

"Ha! That is nothing. If I close myself, the body will be deprived of oxygen and it will die in minutes!" the nose retorted.

The entire argument went on for a few days. Gradually, the mouth and nose found it harder to breathe and swallow. Wondering aloud what had gone wrong, they heard a soft voice from below. "You are suffering now because I have closed myself and not let any faeces or gas out," said the anus.

My 14-year-old audience is correct. Our healthcare system needs to function as one. And doctors need to see all our patients as a whole person complete with psychological, physical, social and spiritual aspects.

"So, it is good that you want to be a doctor with a difference. How do you propose we doctors should change?" I asked.

"Let me think about it first. I have other questions. I have observed too that my GP is working too hard and hardly has time for himself and his family. Maybe I will share with you my thoughts about that too."

Sharp guy, I thought to myself. That reminds me of another unfinished task I am burdened with. *When doctors suffer...* ■

We would like to hear from you or any doctor who is suffering in silence. Email your thoughts to news@sma.org.sg.

“OUR HEALTHCARE SYSTEM NEEDS TO FUNCTION AS ONE.”



Dr Leong Choon Kit is a GP in the private sector. He feels strongly about doctors contributing back to society. As a result, he tries to lend a voice to the silent majority in every issue he has come across, particularly those in healthcare, educational and other social concerns.