



Illustration: Dr Kevin Loy



**HUMANITARIAN AID –
WHY WE SHOULD
GO OUT OF OUR WAY
TO HELP OTHERS**

I was very delighted to have attended Prof Tommy Koh's SMA Lecture entitled "Medicine and Diplomacy" on 7 November 2015 at One Farrer Hotel & Spa. Prof Koh spoke highly of the work that individual doctors do when they go on humanitarian missions, and gave real-life examples of members from our medical community. As doctors, our individual actions matter to the collective effort, sometimes in unexpected ways. By seeking excellence in our own fields of practice, we can enhance Singapore's diplomatic efforts through medicine – as a form of soft power.

The theme of the SMA Lecture is part of SMA's contribution to the SG50 celebrations and a fitting conclusion to this year's activity-packed calendar for the Association. As we enjoy the year-end festivities and take time off from our busy schedules, it is perhaps timely to think about how we can use our skills and expertise for the betterment of people in need who are beyond our own horizons.

Doctors enjoy one of the highest levels of job satisfaction among professionals, and it is not difficult to understand why. We help people directly, whether to cure, care or comfort. The ability to see someone through from illness to health, relieve suffering and build deep relationships with patients is unique to the medical profession. It gives doctors the energy and impetus to deal with a lifetime of challenging work.

There is no shortage of work for doctors in Singapore. Our society is ageing rapidly; our patients fall ill, grow old and frail, and develop chronic diseases that require medical expertise. Indeed, there is much demand for medical care and services within our healthcare system, as well as in community hospitals, charity institutions and voluntary welfare organisations.

Given the great need on home soil, why would doctors desire to venture to distant shores, into difficult or hostile terrain while risking personal safety, to render medical assistance under suboptimal conditions? Are

some of us akin to adrenaline junkies looking for the next level of medical high when we seek to treat patients in a disaster zone?

I know many friends and colleagues who have gone for humanitarian missions and their reasons are anything but that. Some do it to challenge their personal limit, others have an altruistic desire to help the neediest of the needy in times of crisis, while some see these missions as opportunities to make a visible difference in the lives of others.

The act of responding to such calls for urgent help in times of crisis is an articulation of the moral obligation to do that which is *good* and *right*.

Morality and moral actions fall under the branch of philosophy known as ethics. In this sense, our exposure to medical ethics supports the concepts and endeavours of humanitarian missions. As doctors, we understand and hold dearly the primacy of patient autonomy – to treat each patient as an individual worthy of self-determination. We believe that every life has intrinsic value and is worth saving. We act in the best interests of our patients, vow to do no harm and to seek justice for all. Therefore, all patients deserve the same level of care regardless of where they are situated.

When doctors reach out beyond the comforts of our society to go on humanitarian missions, they transcend physical and societal boundaries, and acknowledge that humanity as a whole is one global family.

Finally, the common thread that links the experiences behind every medical mission is not just what the doctors give of themselves, but what they gain personally from the experience.

In the May 2015 issue of *SMA News*, second year Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine student, Hargaven Singh Gill, described his experience of helping HIV-positive children when he was in Nepal in December 2014. He wrote, "Sometimes it was hard to put ourselves in their shoes, because

we couldn't comprehend the pains and rejections they faced from their society. ... It's the reason for what we do that provides us strength, and it is in the middle of these people, that I regained some understanding of my purpose in the medical profession."

In the October 2015 issue of *SMA News*, LTC (Dr) Adrian Tan described his experience of leading the SAF medical mission to Nepal after the devastating earthquake in April of the same year. He wrote, "While we go on a mission to render assistance, often the mission leaves us richer from the experience. The very people we helped also taught us lessons in resilience, courage and generosity."

The purpose of humanitarian aid is to save lives, reduce suffering and show respect for human dignity. There is no better person trained to do this than the medical professional. In the course of this work, doctors, through their acts of compassion, sympathy and love for humanity, ultimately learn to become better doctors. ♦

PROFILE



TEXT BY

DR WONG TIEN HUA

Dr Wong Tien Hua is President of the 56th SMA Council. He is a family medicine physician practising in Sengkang. Dr Wong has an interest in primary care, patient communication and medical ethics.