

Calling It a Day

PROFILE



TEXT BY

DR WONG WEE NAM

Dr Wong Wee Nam graduated from the University of Singapore in 1972. After serving National Service, he came out into private practice as a GP until his retirement. He is an avid contributor to Sgpolitics.net, The Online Citizen, TR Emeritus, the *Straits Times Forum* and the *SMA News*.

Today is the first day of the new year. It is also the start of my retirement. There are mixed feelings inside me.

There is a certain sense of sadness about leaving everything that has become a part of your life. The familiar room that you have spent almost your entire waking hours in, the loyal staff who have stayed to assist you for years, the patients and their families who, in the course of long contact, have become your friends, and the people in the neighbourhood where you worked in and are more familiar with you than the local politician.

As a community doctor, you serve a patient from the cradle to the grave. It is unavoidable that you ought to share the joy of a birth, the happiness of a newly-wed, the pains of chronic diseases in the elderly and the grief of the family whose member has completed his or her life journey. There is also the immense

satisfaction when you treat a poor and indigent patient who cannot afford your service and shows his gratitude by giving you the mandarin oranges that his boss gave him for Chinese New Year.

Rudyard Kipling, the famous writer, knew the daily suffering that doctors go through. In a speech to graduating medical students, he said: "It has long ago decided that you have no working hours that anybody is bound to respect, and nothing except extreme bodily illness will excuse you in its eyes from refusing to help a man who thinks he may need your help at any hour of the day or night. Nobody will care whether you are in your bed or in your bath, on your holiday or at the theater. If any one of the children of men has a pain or a hurt in him you will be summoned. And, as you know, what little vitality you may have accumulated in your leisure will be dragged out of you again." Yes, that's a doctor's life!

Yet in a way, I am relieved that I am retired and I look forward to a new chapter in my life. No need to drag myself out of bed when I am tired. No routine to follow. No goals to set. Just take life free and easy and go with the flow (逍遥自在).

The last month was a period packed with emotions as patients streamed in to collect their final prescription or just to bid me farewell. The many tears and choked voices left me with a heavy heart. I had expected only old aunties to be saddened by my retirement but there were some surprises.

One big, middle-aged Malay man cried uncontrollably as he hugged me. An elderly Indian lady in traditional sari not only hugged me but also gave me a kiss on my neck.

Yesterday, a young scholar who was back on holiday from Boston heard that I was retiring and he immediately rushed down to my clinic to thank me and to say goodbye as he had to fly back to Boston last night. He told me he enjoyed reading my articles online. I didn't have the heart to tell him I was also thinking of retiring from writing. Writing on national issues to a seemingly apathetic population is like

playing the zither to a cow (对牛弹琴). Before I could tell him, he said, "A lot of my friends in Boston also like to read your articles. You have a cult following there." With such encouraging words, I suppose I should change my mind and continue writing?

Our policy-makers should realise this: healthcare is not a commodity that should be bought and sold. After all, the greatest joy in medicine is not in the money you get from patients, but the gratitude you earn from them. It is grateful patients who make your job satisfying. ◆

