

Doctors, Your

HEALTH

Matters Too



We always hear the old adage “Physician, heal thyself”! Personally, I think it to be true but with a caveat: it should not be “heal” but rather along the lines of “prevent”.

A DOCTOR'S HEALTH

We are in the trade but we often take our own health for granted. In the early parts of our career, we tend to push our body and mind to the limit. Those houseman calls that start from 8 am and last till the afternoon of the next day with little or no time to rest are really punishing. One thing to note is that when one has little or no rest, there is a potential risk of making mistakes like prescribing a wrong drug, missing out a drug allergy or giving an injection via the wrong route (intrathecal or intravenous). An interesting thing I learnt when renewing my car insurance was that doctors are classified as high-risk drivers. That is because there have been a number of accidents, fatal or otherwise, where the doctors involved were sleep deprived. If you have relatives, friends or children who are doctors in training, please impress on them that sleep deprivation and driving do not mix well.

Entering into our thirties, we often take our bodies for granted. We experience a lot of stress and the reaction to that could be eating excessively, imbibing lots of alcohol, smoking more than we should and sometimes getting into various forms of gambling. Gambling could well be in the casinos, “punting” in the turf club or leveraging up in equities, derivatives and futures.

In my experience in the private sector, quite a number of my colleagues ended up working long hours with little time to spare for family and friends. A handful of them also ended up with visceral fat due to irregular meal times coupled with seeking solace in food.

Recognising the pitfalls and scenarios that cause us to get into difficulties is the first step. The second is to act on them by shifting ourselves out of a passive mode and actively taking charge of our

lives. As we head in to the second half of our lives, we must remember that life expectancy is taking us into the eighties. This to me is longevity and the idea is then to have the best quality of life, hopefully till the very end before we make a quick and painless exit from this planet. What we really do not want or need is a premature event such as a massive heart attack or a stroke. Such events that could leave us as a cardiac cripple or bedridden for decades before our eventual demise form a very frightening prospect.

MEASURES TO TAKE

It is therefore important to make sure we do not put ourselves at risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes. We often counsel our patients about their body mass index, whereas a number of us have knowledge deficits about the calories in the food that we consume. The knowledge of the calories present

in hawker food is particularly important as the majority of our patients do eat out. Over the years, I have noticed that all the endocrinologists whom I know in private practice have lost weight and attained their ideal body mass index. I think it is because they make it a point to talk to their patients, especially those with diabetes and hyperlipidaemia, about food intake and they have ended up "walking the talk". I wonder if that is the case for endocrinologists in the public sector as well! Sending your patient to a dietician or nutritionist is a good idea but better yet, educate yourself about food intake, glycaemic indices and calories of common foods to effect a change in your own diet.

Having lost quite a bit of weight myself over the years, I would say that exercise has a role to play but your eating habits remain as the main driver. Nevertheless, a brisk walk thrice weekly with a decent heart rate pounding away is effective. Having a wearable device on your wrist and clocking ten thousand steps daily is yet another possibility for the long haul. I tell my patients who take public transport to alight a train stop earlier or forego the feeder bus and take a brisk walk home. That would be the exercise needed for the day! My personal take is that a slow but long jog is very effective for weight loss.

Yet another aspect to think about is the loss of muscle mass. It has been estimated that upon hitting our forties, we lose a pound of muscle annually. At this age, testosterone levels in men slowly decline at a rate of one percent annually, while for women, there's the dreaded menopause and its associated symptoms. That is why muscle work is important; but I am not about to ask you to pump iron at the gym. The reality is that gym work is mostly about the muscles that you can see and look good on the outside: in your chest and arms. The

muscles that you cannot see are those in your back, glutes and thighs; these are the biggest muscles in your body. To work these muscles and to get them to ache is not easy. Yet it is the aching muscles that burn your calories and you can work them hard with Pilates, yoga and ballroom dancing. Besides, pumping iron can lead to injuries that will take seemingly forever to heal when you are at a certain age. One more benefit is that strengthening the core muscles can lead to good posture and stability, translating to fall prevention.

Finally, please avail yourself to medical technology and have your blood work done regularly. I do mine annually around the time of my birthday, as your birthday is always a good reminder of mortality. Please don't forget your colonoscopy when you reach 50 years of age! There are prominent members of our profession who have not followed this important guideline only to find advanced metastatic colorectal cancer a few years later. Cardiac imaging or functional cardiac testing is also important to prevent premature cardiac events. For my female colleagues, please find a good radiographer that does your mammogram with little or no pain! Do ask your female radiologist colleagues for the heads-up.

CONCLUDING WORDS

If you have to take your statin, so be it. If you want to do your MRI stroke screen or carotid imaging, please go ahead. I would like to leave you with the lessons learnt from the Harvard study on happiness. Some of you may be aware that this study was ongoing for 75 years and the cohort included a US president, several senators, and captains of industry. The first lesson gleaned is that love is the key and it is important to cope with life through mechanisms that do not push love away. What this means is that it is important not to be negative, prickly and nasty; and not to be labelled as a curmudgeon. Finding contentment in your work is critical and as doctors, we are way ahead of the curve in terms of goodwill and gratitude from our patients.

It is important to have a group of professional colleagues to fall back on.

Keeping in touch with fellow doctors helps to foster friendships, trigger discussions on difficult cases and also provides the opportunity to learn from each other on matters outside of medicine, from managing businesses to investment decisions. Sometimes, running a solo practice can be insular and it allows withdrawal from society to creep up on us without us even realising it.

Strong relationships with your spouse, friends, family, children and colleagues are important and remember to invest in friendships with people a whole generation younger. It can be really sad to reach longevity when all your friends in your cohort have perished. Finally, how we cope with challenges in a mature way and maybe even through creative expression (eg, art, music, dancing or writing) is paramount to attaining that elusive better quality of life. I wish all my readers success in their journey to reach that holy grail of happiness, longevity and contentment. ♦

PROFILE



TEXT BY

DR CHONG YEH WOEI

Dr Chong was SMA President from 2009 to 2012 and is a member of the 56th SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the *FT Weekend* and of course, wishes for world peace...

