



The EDITORS' MUSINGS



Dr Tina Tan

Editor

Dr Tan is a psychiatrist with the Better Life Psychological Medicine Clinic, and a visiting consultant at the Institute of Mental Health. She is also an alumnus of Duke-NUS Medical School. Between work and family life, she squeezes time out for her favourite pastimes – reading a good (fiction) book and writing.

You'd think that as a psychiatrist, I'd be more knowledgeable on the topic of medical humanities. Movies? Aren't those films for unwinding and entertainment? Don't make me ponder too much, please. Art? Um... my children know that Mummy is notorious for not being able to draw, though I can hold my own in a game of Pictionary.

Which is why this issue is *perfect* for someone like me. On an intuitive level, most of us recognise the importance of the humanities in medicine, but how many of us are conscious of it, or go the extra lengths to ensure we apply it in our daily practice? It's not just about our medical schools incorporating the humanities into their curriculum. It's about making a deliberate and regular choice to expand our minds through the voices of others, who may not necessarily be our patients, using different mediums like art and film.

I'm grateful for the enthusiastic contributions from my colleagues that showcase what medical humanities are about. I hope this inspires our readers to go beyond what's in this issue, and perhaps participate in some of the activities and programmes that were highlighted in the various articles. You (and your patients) would probably benefit more than you realise.

The night before my Membership of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom (MRCP) Part 2B – now called Practical Assessment of Clinical Examination Skills (PACES) – in Edinburgh, Scotland, I took the local bus to a cineplex to watch the then newly released film *Forrest Gump*. It was an easy choice for me being a lifelong movie buff. While terrified of the neurology station of this much feared clinical examination, whose preparation was a scary bottomless pit, I still felt a big dose of inspiration and buttered popcorn was the right prescription. My good friend and bed and breakfast roommate was burning the midnight oil mugging up for his paediatrics MRCP. *Forrest Gump* was soul-lifting, magical realism at its finest – about an underdog with a disability who rose above pain and adversity, triumphed over odds, found healing and true meaning, and gets the girl in the end. And I passed the examination, *phew*. The arts have always provided a life blood to medicine.

Chinese physician-turned-writer Lu Xun (鲁迅), China's greatest modern writer, was revered by Mao Zedong. He was hailed by Mao as the "willing ox" of the Party and "the saint of modern China", yet also paradoxically feared and mistrusted for being a loud critic of China's policy and politics, its lack of freedom of speech and expression.

English physician-turned-philosopher John Locke is the father of modern liberal thought, whose treatise became the soul and foundation of the American Declaration of Independence, of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Modern physician writers AJ Cronin, Lewis Thomas, Samuel "The House of God" Shem, Oliver Sacks, Paul Kalanithi, Atul

Dr Toh Han Chong

Guest Editor

Dr Toh is a senior consultant, clinician-scientist and deputy director of the National Cancer Centre Singapore. He was a former Editor of *SMA News*. In his free time, Dr Toh enjoys eating durians and ice cream, reading, writing, rowing and watching films. Thankfully, the latter four are not fattening.

Gawande and Siddhartha Mukherjee have dived into their professional lives, their keen observations and sometimes personal pain to weave amazing, deeply human writings on science, medicine, the joys, juice and absurdity of medical life, social ills and the human condition. It is widely believed that exposure to the humanities fine-tunes the medical student and trainee to become a more empathetic, questioning, critical and ethical physician. Now that doctors are empowered with so much more technology to be nearly trans-human, there is an even greater need to balance this with a return to the art, heart, soul and intuition of the profession.

This issue on humanities and medicine reflects the burning belief that medicine embraces a very deep, wide humanity and human-ness: of the patient and their suffering, families, society, health access and equity, of right and wrong, of a social compact rather than an overriding financial contract even in an increasingly complex transactional world, of life and death. And that doctors are not bots. ♦