



“Listening to Letter from America”

Reviewed By Dr Daniel Fung

We are frequently told that the elderly are misunderstood, misrepresented and altogether missed out. Yet few of us will sit back and wonder how and why this happens.

When I was asked to read through the manuscript for a novel by Prof Kua Ee Heok, only one thought flashed through my mind. “More work!” I was dead tired when I reached home but curiosity got the better of me and I reached out to leaf through the pile of papers he had handed me at a meeting 3 hours ago. One hundred and fifty-five pages with 6 chapters were not normally daunting. But after a morning discussing how to help an autistic child with a distraught 24-year old single parent mother and an afternoon of envisaging a vision for child psychiatry in Singapore, I was a little overwhelmed.

Like Dr Weng, the protagonist in the story, I started out as a skeptic wondering what I could possibly enjoy in a story about a bunch of old fogies in a day centre. And like Dr Weng entering in from the “overbearing heat” to the cool air-conditioned comfort, it became a fascinating journey of discovery into

the history, lives and struggles of early Singaporeans.

The title suggests that the book is like Alistair Cooke’s Letter from America, a weekly commentary about life in America. Indeed it has a similar feel when the elderly (we have no indication of their ages) group relates their personal lives. On the superficial level, the story is about a young doctor walking into the lives of 6 old people and a supervisor who hates to be quoted. The six elderly men and women share about themselves and their rich experiences to find a common bond. Dr Weng makes interesting remarks in his own mind about the medical and psychiatric aspects of aging while Superintendent Ah Hock is the quintessential Singaporean, never willing to stake a claim on his own views. On a deeper level, it serves to capture the spirit of the Joes, Alis, Lims, Meis, Ranis and Seng Huats of Singapore, linked by their past and hoping for their future,

encapsulated into an indictment of society at large.

Prof Kua has a penchant for stating the obvious, in wonderful new ways. We are frequently told that the elderly are misunderstood, misrepresented and altogether missed out. Yet few of us will sit back and wonder how and why this happens. The language is readable, clear and succinct. Prof Kua’s sense of humour is also evident and there are many digs at the Singapore psyche. For example, when Seng Huat insists on discharge from hospital, it was not for missing home but being “afraid of the hospital bill”. Like all good teachers, the gentle professor has also sought to teach the reader about World War 2, bird watching, and Psychiatry. An essential read for the young and the young at heart. Don’t quote me lah, read it yourself. ■

Editorial Note: “Listening to Letter from America” is available at all book stalls at \$14.00. Publisher: Raffles, an imprint of SNP Editions Pte Ltd.

HOW TO CHARGE MY PROFESSIONAL FEE?

Ever wondered how the SMA recommended consultation fees are arrived at? The answer used to be figures that are customary, usual and reasonable to both doctors and their patients. In 1996 however, the GP fees were revised based on results of practice cost and workload of doctors. What should the next revision be based on?

The specialist fees recommended are closely adhered to by doctors.

However, some doctors scoff at the recommended GP fees as being unrealistically ‘high’ because these GPs used the high mark-up on drugs to subsidise undeclared consultation fees. The demand of the public for more transparency in the pricing of medicine and the posted consultation fees for the Ministry’s Primary Care Partnership scheme show that there is even more reason now for the fees to be openly charged.

However, would the public accept the higher consultation fee even though the total fee of consultation fee and medicine is the same? How should SMA revise its next fee scale? Does the increased cost of practice and medical indemnity matter? Find out in the Seminar on Professional Financial Management - How to Charge Professional Fees on Saturday, 4 November 2000, 2.30pm at the COMB.