

Reflections on MASEAN

By A/Prof Goh Lee Gan

As President, I had the duty and privilege to lead the SMA delegation to two MASEAN meetings, one last year and one just recently in November this year. The Singapore delegation this year consisted of A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean (who is also the Secretary General of MASEAN), Dr Wong Chiang Yin, Miss Tan Hwee Ping and myself. We had a larger delegation last year.

I have several positive reflections of the events from the perspective of fellow medical professions in the South East Asian region that I would like to share with the profession, particularly, those who will be Presidents of our Association and members of delegations in the future.

The first observation is the South East Asian region of the twenty-first century is going to be a more exciting one where the medical profession in each nation has a political will to do something positive, infrastructurally to the health of its people as well as to build capacity in the members of their professions.

The topics being discussed were quite different from those discussed in 1983 when I attended as Honorary Secretary of the SMA. The one topic that stands vividly in my mind to this day was the great unhappiness on the part of some countries about our doctors advertising our hospitals in their Yellow Pages. Our President then, Dr N K Yong, was astute enough to promise he would take action when he got back. He did. The delegates made a stand then, that "we are a brotherhood of doctors, the publicising of a practitioner in the mass media outside of his own country for the purpose of profit is unethical and an act of discourtesy and disrespect." So, entrepreneurs beware. You may destroy all the goodwill and trust that took years to build.

The second observation is the empowerment that we as a small nation,

have been providing to our colleagues, in helping them develop professionally. Our efforts were appreciated and acknowledged in speeches of local dignitaries and even more in the positive relationships and regards that we enjoyed as a consequence. The work of the two immediate past presidents, Dr Tan Kok Soo and A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean, during their respective terms of office, had been instrumental, in my perception, in helping to foster an atmosphere of a "mutual investment company" called MASEAN. We are already seeing the positive results of such an atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill. The reports, activities and sentiments speak for themselves. Such a continued positive relationship and action depends a great deal on each President and members of delegation ensuring adequate attention and energy is given to a forum of this kind, hence, the topic of this President's Forum.

The third observation is the MASEAN forum today is not only just a business meeting or a complaint session. It has also become a forum for joint action on professional matters. Last year, several issues of common interest were identified as important topics to merit formal presentations from member countries who have ground experience. These were presented this year, namely, the potential impact on the medical professions that the ASEAN free trade agreement will bring, the experience with community participation in empowering communities on health

matters and the status and promise of family medicine in the health care delivery system. Malaysia led in the first forum, Myanmar in the second and Singapore in the third forum. Quite by serendipity, electronic linking up was also a topic in the Informal ASEAN meeting held on 23 November in Singapore, a week after the MASEAN meeting.

Next year, in Phnom-Penh, where Cambodia will play host, the following forums will be presented under the theme of "Health in Transition": Indonesia will lead in the discussion on the ability of the Indonesian Medical Association to maintain an umbrella function for its speciality sections; Malaysia and Myanmar will jointly lead in the discussion on Cross-ASEAN e-CME and professional linking up; and Singapore will lead in the discussion on its experience in setting the Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism.

Already, Malaysia has gotten into action. This weekend, the President of Malaysian Medical Association will meet with Presidents of SMA, IMA and MyMA to discuss the subject of Cross ASEAN e-CME in detail.

It is exciting that MASEAN is more than just a name. It has become a forum for joint professional action of medical professions in South East Nations. SMA needs to continue to be part of this Forum.

Let me also wish all readers in Singapore and overseas a Merry Christmas and a great year ahead, in what is the beginning of the true new millennium. ■

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&
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