

Three Wishes for Christmas

By Daniel Fung

A common question child psychiatrists like to ask the children is: "What are your three wishes?" This may seem whimsical but the answers often time are symbolic of their fantasies and needs. I wonder what the answers will be if we ask doctors the same question. I suppose this is an appropriate question to ask this Christmas.

Wish #1: Doctors are not required to be all things to all people

We just can't do everything. The media continually portrays the successful doctor as one who balances his/her life in many different ways. Today's young doctor is expected to see patients, engage in research and teach their younger colleagues. One might even add in the 4th dimension of being involved in voluntary work. And there is the pressure to raise a family (and have more children because there is a national shortage). It reminded me of a joke about the 3 Jacks. Singapore doctors are like the 3 Jacks; Jack of all trades; Jack be nimble Jack be quick; and Jack the Ripper. You try and guess what that means.

Let doctors be aware of the myriad opportunities available within the profession, whether it is that of a clinician, a research scientist, or a teacher. Let him/her focus on their needs, direct them if there is a pressing need but allow them to develop areas of expertise without stifling the passion. If they wish to do more than one area of work, let it be so but allow them adequate balance. Once again, there is no easy answer.

Naturally, one would say, how can you provide equal remuneration for all the different types of work? Obviously it can't be achieved in the material sense but equity can be achieved in other ways. I cannot say that I know what is the perfect balance but I am sure that it is

not in doing everything. I know of a story that was heartbreaking as it is telling. Recently, in Toronto, a young doctor who works in a successful family practice and staying in a swanky part of town decided to successfully commit suicide with her 6-month-old baby by jumping off a subway station into an oncoming train. She had even written a book on maintaining the right balance in life!

Wish #2: Doctors are not expected to be perfect

The press is quick to jump on errant doctors and on complaints against doctors, regardless of the facts behind the case. I have no quarrel with the fact that doctors have much entrusted into their hands. And we are all aware of the saying that him whom much is entrusted, much is expected. A negligent doctor is someone who has fallen short of the standards set by his peers. But what about those doctors who make honest mistakes in the course of their work? The SMC reports rising numbers in complaints every year. I guess it has something to do with respect and trust. This requires doctors to develop adequate relationships with their patients beyond the service they provide. If our patients are to respect us, we must first earn their respect.

We must show that we care. How can we do that? The answer lies within ourselves. We must be humble and ready to acknowledge that we are fallible. Ask any patient about a doctor they dislike, he is the one that tells them what they should do and reprimand them for asking too many questions. In today's society where the patient is well informed and wishes charge of his own health, the doctor's role needs to change from an authoritarian person to an expert guidance in helping the patient decide.

Wish #3: Doctors are not asked to think like businessmen

A colleague spoke on how we should stop thinking like doctors and start thinking like businessmen. This was in the context of a discussion on restructuring of our hospital. A business has the primary concern of making profits. A profession is primarily one that provides a service that is beneficial and for the good of society. Medicine is a profession and perhaps on a deeper level, a calling. We are here to help people, to alleviate their suffering and occasionally save lives. Our main existence is thus, to serve our patients. Medicine is not about making profits out of people's misery and sickness. Obviously this noble aim should be tempered by being able to make enough to cover the cost of facilities, staff, and medications.

In addition, most doctors also want to have enough to have a decent standard of living commensurate with citizens in our country. Yet the bottom line should not be money but the care of a fellow human being in distress. But medical practice is now steeped in making ends meet. How can doctors resolve these apparently diametrically opposite views of running a medical practice? I don't know the answer. Part of the process of learning to grapple with ethical and professional issues is to enhance our ability to continually question the system that we are in. If we stop thinking, our ethical neurons will atrophy and die out. We would then truly become the businessmen my colleague suggested. So keep those ethical neurons alive!

When I ask my patients what their 3 wishes are, I always remind myself that I may not be able to solve their problems. But by helping the children identify their needs, they may be one step closer to finding ways of helping themselves. I hope the same applies to our 3 Christmas wishes. But then again, it may just be wishful thinking. Merry Christmas. ■