

2	.....	President's Forum – The Year that has Been
3	.....	Commentary – Medical Education: Ways & Means (Part 1)
5	.....	Medical Education – What is Problem – Based Learning?
7	.....	Ethics & Professionalism – Understanding Health Law
9	.....	Interview – Interview with Professor Roger Mazze Staged Diabetes Management Singapore
10	.....	Report – The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) – The Health Promotion Board (HPB)
12	.....	On Being A Patient – Coping with Cancer – A Doctor as Patient (Part 2)

Launch of "Say It Right"



Mr Chan Soo Sen

Mr Chan Soo Sen, Parliamentary Secretary (Prime Minister's Office & Ministry of Health) launched the "Say It Right" course on 26 March 2001. An initiative by Changi General Hospital, this is a professional communication skills training course for doctors to enhance skills for problematic encounters.

Mr Chan highlighted the need for doctors to be able to communicate effectively with their patients. As doctors and their patients often come from different cultural and educational backgrounds, problems can sometimes arise from miscommunication or lack of communication. Mr Chan illustrated his point with a fictitious account of an elderly lady patient and her experience at one hospital (see inset).

Mr Chan also elaborated on the need to empathise with a patient's feeling and state of mind, and to treat patients as individuals rather than cases. "In the course of a busy schedule, we may be terse and impatient in responding to a patient or his family members. This may result in resentment, dissatisfaction, anger, and bitter public complaints that damage the image of the hospitals and the professionals." Doctors also need to know how to deal with the anxieties and emotions of the patients and their relatives, who are in the unfamiliar surroundings of a hospital and do not know what to expect or what may happen to them. ■

"This old lady had to be admitted to a hospital for medical observation, but she was not told exactly what was to be done or what to expect. This was her first hospital admission. The last time she went to the hospital was more than 30 years ago, when she visited her mother in one of the old hospital wards. Her memories of that hospital have been a place with big, long and cold corridors, with big rooms full of patients looking miserable and weary. Her mother, as it turned out, died in that hospital 30 years ago. Now it was her turn. Because of the bad experience 30 years ago, she had the impression that people who go to a hospital usually do not come out alive, and especially that hospital. In her apprehension, she packed along everything she thought she would need, including all her life savings. When she arrived at the ward, she was advised against bringing so much *barang-barang*. "This is it," she thought to herself. "I know I will follow mother's footsteps, and worse, without the *barang-barang*!"

"Now most of her time in hospital was spent lying in bed, so she wondered to herself, "What is actually wrong with me? Does anyone know what is wrong with me?" Everyone around looked so busy, and did not have the time to talk. Anyway she did not know whom to ask. Then some doctors walked into the ward the next morning and began to review the other lady patient in the same ward. That other lady was not feeling well

after being given *char kway teow* by her relatives the previous day. She admitted that to the doctors and said she did not like the food that was served in the hospital. This happened to be the day the press reported the case of a patient being given *char kway teow* after an operation. So the doctors were not so amused, and told her she must follow dietary instructions. That sounded like scolding, and the other lady complained bitterly after the doctors left."

"Seeing what happened, our old lady became afraid and upset. She was afraid to ask the doctors the questions in her mind when they eventually came round to her. The doctors did not explain to her what was wrong with her, but only briefly told her that there was nothing for her to worry about. That did not sound reassuring enough as the doctors did not tell her whether and when she could go home. She did not dare to ask, as she was fearful that the doctors might scold her and detain her longer. So she felt unhappy and uneasy the whole day."

"When her son arrived to visit her in the evening, she opened up and poured all the complaints in her heart to him. He became irritated and wrote a long letter to the Straits Times the following day, complaining that the doctors were uncaring and rude, and that he had heard that the hospital did not have a good reputation. He also demanded to know why the doctors were not doing anything more for his mother."



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