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# SMA NEWS

## Reflections on 2001

By A/Prof Goh Lee Gan



**T**he first year of the new millennium is drawing to a close, but not without its moments for each of us to think about.

### HEALTH SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

Some headway has been made in healthcare system reform over the year. More needs to be done. Thus, there is a need to explore ways to develop our health system such that incentives are aligned towards responsiveness, cost containment and quality, and not just cost containment alone. Also, there is a need to see how family doctors are enabled to do more in the healthcare system: for a moment it is a desperate struggle for many of them to keep afloat. The development of Singapore into a service-cum-training hub as a paradigm shift from a purely service hub needs to be considered too: there are advantages for such a paradigm shift.

There are now seven doctors in Parliament. We congratulate their success in being elected and holding office as MPs and Ministers. We look forward to their leadership and vision in the further development of our healthcare services.

### MEDICAL LITIGATION

The three cases that went up to high court in the year have much for us to reflect upon. Surgical treatment can be tricky and post-operative care complicated by unexpected events. There is also a need for a good dose of medical paternalism and assertiveness towards compliance to a referral.

Adverse outcome to medical care is a complex issue and is a result of many factors: system factors, patient factors and doctor factors. There is a need for a good doctor-patient relationship as

the basis of medical care. The medico-legal conference organised by the Medico-Legal Society of Singapore, focusing on medical negligence reform was timely and the society is to be congratulated for the vision of choosing such a theme for its conference this year. Arising out of this meeting, there was a discussion that the SMA and the medical defence organisations should spearhead a work group of all relevant stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health and Law Society, to study how patient safety could be assured and mishaps prevented. Perhaps this could be done in the coming year.

### BEING PREPARED

The greatest moments of 2001 are no doubt the bombing of America on

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Wishing our Readers

**MERRY XMAS  
&  
HAPPY NEW YEAR**

From:  
42<sup>nd</sup> SMA Council &  
SMA News Editorial Board



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11 September and the anthrax outbreak that followed.

America lost its twin World Trade Center towers and some 3,000 people (excluding the attack on the Pentagon) in the 911 attack. It was initially estimated that some 7000 people would have lost their lives. The lower numbers now available reveal how successful rescue workers were in saving lives before they lost their own. It is another posthumous credit to them<sup>(1)</sup>. There were certainly some hair-raising moments for those who made a dash to freedom. The sense of “Lost and Found” experienced by Mr Lau Guan Kim, a retired pharmacist who used to run Little’s Pharmacy and is familiar to many of us, is one such example. His daughter, Rachel ran down 38 flights of stairs to freedom before the building she was in, collapsed<sup>(2)</sup>.

As of 5 December, a total of 22 cases of anthrax have been identified; 11 were confirmed as inhalational anthrax, and 11 (7 confirmed and 4 suspected) were cutaneous<sup>(3)</sup>. There were 5 deaths.

The index case was a 63-year-old man working in a post centre and he presented on 2 October with fever, myalgias and malaise for 4 days and became disoriented on the fifth day. Bacterial meningitis was provisionally diagnosed and a lumbar puncture done. Diagnosis was made from gram positive bacilli in the haemorrhagic spinal fluid. He died despite treatment<sup>(4)</sup>.

Although the risk of a chemical or biological attack is small, there is a need to update doctors and healthcare providers on the symptoms and signs of such agents as part of a readiness plan. Keeping the public updated of the facts is also of utmost importance. The Chem-Bio Agents update organised by MOH, College and SMA on 8 December was therefore timely.

## GETTING TOGETHER

The year-end is also a festive season. Although the economic downturn and pay cut may dampen spending, it will not take away the spirit of the season. It is still a time when we get together as families and friends to share the joy of being together.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions from several medical colleagues, coordinated by Dr Daniel Fung, our Editorial Board member, in this edition of the SMA News, reflect their thoughts and experiences. Let us thank Dr Fung for his excellent coordinating and our contributors for sharing their heartwarming stories.

## WISHING YOU

The SMA News Editorial Board and the Secretariat staff send you greetings of the season and our best wishes for the New Year. ■

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## Credits:

We would like to thank Grace Fung, eldest daughter of Dr Daniel Fung, for the family portrait of the Fungs on pg.1.