

Wong to Wong: Clockbuilders and Timekeepers

Response to Wong Wee Nam's "Physician or Politician"

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin

When the SMA News Editor, Dr Cheong Pak Yean invited me to give a response to Dr Wong Wee Nam's seminal work titled "Physician or Politician", I had my reservations as to baring my mind on such a delicate subject. After all, any discussion on politics and politicians in Singapore should best be left to politicians and during general elections, unless you are the Prime Minister and a doctor, in which case you can dwell on politics even in a Congress of the Academy of Medicine address⁽¹⁾.

But on reflection, I guess I have to come clean about the views expressed by Dr Wong Wee Nam: I disagree with most of what is said in his article, which is essentially based on the following two premises:

- a) A doctor's training equips him well to be a politician.
- b) Most of life's problems mirror the human body and medical practice.

The larger question we have to answer is not just whether doctors make good politicians but more fundamentally, can doctors do anything well besides seeing patients? The commonly held view is that we are too specialised to be of much use to anyone except the sick. Doctors have little understanding of vital disciplines such as economics, finance, strategy, and humanities that leaders and senior managers need to know to run large corporations or government.

Before I venture further, I must give the caveat that these views are the resultant distillate of my somewhat unbalanced and unsound mind in this matter. A mind born of similarly unbalanced and unsound work experiences.

Think about it: from the first day you enter medical school (especially the local one) you are told incessantly by your seniors and your teachers that you are the best and the brightest on

the campus, even brighter than the other bunch of bright people on the other side of the hill – the law school students. (But let's face it, which smart guy would choose a curriculum with 50-hour weeks, night duties and "holiday terms"? Compare this to law school which has 12-hour weeks, proximity to the Arts canteen and real holidays, and we doctors should realise we ain't so smart after all.)

So we all leave medical school thinking we are the best – not exactly a balanced view to begin a working life with.

More was to come for me. I went to work in a place where doctors were the be-all and end-all. But the boss changed and suddenly, another group of people came into being (we shall call them here simply as "non-doctors"). The problem was that this new group of employees also had the same unbalanced and unsound belief: "that they were the best and the brightest". They also thought they could do anything, including solving tough problems like health economics, understand the need for more dialysis machines as well as the intricacies of hospital planning and design – all because they had a Liberal Arts degree from an Ivy League University, and belonged to this special group called "non-doctors". And so as the Chinese saying goes "one mountain cannot have two tigers", what ensued was a kind of sequential extermination of doctors from this workplace. For those of you who saw the movie "Independence Day", picture doctors as the earthlings and the non-doctors as the aliens in huge spaceships blowing up cities one by one and you'll get the idea.

One of them even told us as if by fiat, "We are the clockbuilders and you are the timekeepers".

After some three years in such an unbalanced and unsound environment, I have been suitably conditioned to pretend to believe that doctors are really good for nothing but seeing patients.

To suggest otherwise is probably heretical to some. Some are born to build clocks, and some are born to mark time. Those who are not content to be timekeepers can leave – which is what most of us did. Many of us became senior managers in drug and biotech companies, hospital groups, or general practitioners. We still meet once in a while, this band of ex-timekeepers in exile, over a meal, and reminisce over our "timekeeping" days.

Back to the present. We now have nine doctors in Parliament including three Ministers of State covering five Ministries. Notwithstanding that I know quite a few of them personally and have no doubts as to their abilities as politicians and administrators, I am NOT as celebratory as many of my fellow doctors. I am not yet ready, like them, to declare that this is conclusive proof that doctors can be more than technicians of medical science and patient-interfaces or that medical training equips us to be politicians. The celebrated nine are probably the exceptions rather than the norm. We all know there are still many who do not believe that doctors are of any good beyond the clinic, the bedside and the operating theatre. Given half a chance, these detractors would still readily consign us to being timekeepers because we are "too specialised". The term "too specialised" can have the same effect on doctors working outside the practice of medicine as the label "capitalist" can have on a man in China during the Cultural Revolution, I am afraid.

In a sense, I must be true to myself. Just as I do not believe that some are clockbuilders by design and some are timekeepers by bigotry, I do not subscribe to the belief that doctors can naturally make good politicians. Performance under fire is what counts at the end of the day. Can a doctor deliver as a minister or can someone

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else? Only results matter, not the training or the professional guild one belongs to.

Democratic government is of the people, by the people and for the people; not of doctors, by doctors and for doctors. We still have much to prove as a profession that we can do more than see patients. Believe me, many are our detractors. There is

still much to do, little to celebrate and even less to shout about. The profession has been given a chance to prove itself to be more than timekeepers but the verdict is still out.

So my fellow doctors, before we jump the gun and declare a brave new world for the medical profession, let us admonish ourselves with what one of our most celebrated colleague cum politician said to his countrymen:

“The revolution is not yet successful, (therefore my) comrades, we still need to work hard.” – Dr Sun Yat Sen ■

Reference

1. *Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad. The 13th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration – Whether Training in Medicine Makes a Better Politician? Annals of the Academy of Medicine Singapore 1997; 26(3): 376-376-9.*