

Physician or Politician?

By Dr Wong Wee Nam

The recent entry into Parliament of nine doctors and the appointment of three of them as Ministers of State have raised some eyebrows in the medical fraternity. Not only in the history of Singapore's Parliament had there never been such a high influx of the men (and woman) in white overalls through its portal, neither had there been a minister who was a qualified doctor, let alone three.

Is this a sudden recognition that doctors can play a role in the management of the country? If this is so, then such recognition has been long overdue. Or is this just a test to see whether doctors can play such a role?

For some reason or other, doctors are always thought only to be good at treating diseases and taking care of individual patients.

It is a longstanding view that because of our specialised training, all other things are beyond us. We are said to not have a good enough grasp of economics to be able to make any hard-nosed decisions about the running of the country. We also make poor administrators because we are too concerned with individual human feelings.

The idea that a doctor cannot do anything else besides doctoring is baseless. In fact it was Dr William Petty, professor of anatomy at Oxford and a physician to the army of Oliver Cromwell, who had actually founded modern economics. His economic ideas form the basis of the economic theories of Adam Smith, Ricardo and Karl Marx. The tool of using public works to solve unemployment actually came from him and preceded Maynard Keynes by two hundred years.

If running a country is like running a business where economics dominates the human being, then we should leave this job to the businessmen and the economists. On the other hand, if we believe that in the management of a country, the human being should control economics, then the doctor should be able to do the job as well as the lawyer, engineer or PhD holder.

By virtue of his training, a doctor would easily fit into a political role as a

duckling would take to the water. From past records, there has been no lack of doctors taking part in politics. A few of our alumni have even gone back to become top political leaders in their own countries.

There is no doubt that there is a huge pool of brain power in the medical profession. It would indeed be a loss to the nation, if this source of talent was not tapped for the governance of the country. The question is: Does a good brain necessarily make the doctor a good politician?

A young entrant into the coming Parliament offered the view that doctors might make good politicians because they are good listeners. He did not mention that they are also good at using their scalpels. Indeed, perhaps it is this ability to listen, to empathise and to speak his mind that our colleague, Dr Tan Cheng Bock could score such a high percentage of votes in the last general election.

Addressing the problem of a constituency is really not very much different from addressing the problem of a patient. It requires listening and understanding. It requires the resolution of the material (or physical) aspect of the problem as well as its psycho-social aspect. Thus a doctor who becomes a politician would merely be applying his professional skills and training to a different set of circumstances.

Walter Alvarez in *The Incurable Physician* wrote: "Surely, if ever there was a profession in which the practitioners should constantly be thinking, observing, puzzling, and reasoning, it should be medicine." As life-long training creates indelible habits, it is to be expected that the doctor would be constantly thinking, observing, puzzling, and reasoning even when he becomes a politician.

How about addressing the affairs of the country? Would our training as a doctor help us understand wider issues?

There is no reason why our training in medicine would not make a doctor a good Member of Parliament with the ability to debate national issues or a minister who could make good political decisions. To me, a sick human being is not very much different from

a sick nation. Rudolf Virchow, who was an anthropologist, pathologist and statesman, and who also had a sinister lymph node named after him, said that medicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine on a large scale.

He should know better, being a doctor and a statesman. The physiology of a nation is no different from the physiology of the human body. A country imports and exports. The human being ingests and excretes. A country needs a good infrastructure to function well just as a body needs developed muscles and bones to be strong. A country also needs a strong defence as a body needs its immune system. Understanding the workings of a country would not be more difficult than understanding the anatomy, physiology and the pathology of the human body.

Of such similarities between managing a country's problems and a patient's illness, Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad, the only alumni from King Edward VII College of Medicine to have become a Prime Minister, said in the 13th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration delivered at the 30th Singapore-Malaysia Congress of Medicine, 1 August 1996, "...running a nation involves solving problems. Developing a nation also involves solving a thousand and one problems. So does managing foreign relations, internal affairs etc. All of them have to be handled methodically. And doctors have a tidy mind even if their cluttered desks suggest otherwise. Using the methods of diagnosis and treatment with which doctors are familiar, other problems can be resolved and straightened. So I think doctors with their training make better politicians. Maybe not the best but pretty good anyway⁽¹⁾."

As medical students, Claude Bernard taught us that cells are functional units of life and there is the milieu interieur in which cells carry out their activities. To attain normal physiological function, the body has a system of feedback mechanism to maintain homeostasis. Like the body, a country needs a constant feedback mechanism to maintain a constant internal environment. Without this homeostasis, the harmony of the system is disrupted and the organism (or the country) becomes sick.



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Medical students who fail to understand Claude Bernard will not become doctors. If you are a doctor, that means you have understood Monsieur Bernard. In that case, there is no reason why a qualified physician would not be able to see that homeostasis is the fundamental mechanism to maintaining social order. And government is all about maintaining social order.

Does that mean that all doctors will pass with flying colours when they become politicians? Not necessarily so. There are a few traits inherent in doctors that might spell their downfall. Physicians, after they have practised too long, can sometimes feel omnipotent, become very arrogant, self-opinionated and be insensitive to their patients' desires and feelings. Politicians too, when they have been in power for too long, can feel omnipotent, easily become very arrogant, self-opinionated and be insensitive to the people's desires and feelings. Doctors with such undesirable traits could see them being reinforced when they become politicians.

A conversation, or rather a lecture, from a physician to a medical student in Sinclair Lewis' *Arrowsmith*, illustrates this point clearly. Said the physician to the medical student, "I would try to convince you that

my statements may be accepted, not on my humble authority, but because they are the conclusions of wise men – men wiser or certainly a little older than you, my friend – through many ages. But as I have no desire to indulge in fancy flights of rhetoric and eloquence, I shall merely say that you will accept, and you will study, and you will memorise, because I tell you to!"

His arrogance is also illustrated by Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Illyich*, "There was only one question Ivan Illyich wanted answered: was his condition dangerous or not? But the doctor ignored that question as irrelevant. From the doctor's point of view, such a question was unworthy of consideration."

Having said all these, there is no other discipline, however, that equips a person more adequately for the role of a politician than medicine. The doctor has in his bag many tricks of the trade that can be used in politics.

For example, when a problem cannot be solved, just remember what Voltaire had said: "The efficient physician is the man who successfully amuses his patients while nature effects a cure."

Also remember what Hippocrates said. The Father of Medicine taught, "These observances (physicians) impose because of the divine origin of disease, claiming superior knowledge and alleging other

causes, so that, should the patient recover, the reputation for cleverness may be theirs, but should (he) die, they may have a sure fund of excuses with the defence that they are not all to be blamed, but the gods." In other words, when the patient recovers, the doctor can claim credit for the cure. When the patient dies, just blame it on some external divine forces.

There is, however, one strong therapeutic tool in the physician's armory of prescription that politicians should not use. Plato rightly thought that such a measure should only be confined to medicine. He said, "A lie is only useful as a medicine to men. The use of such medicines should be confined to physicians." When a doctor uses such a prescription, he is deemed to be compassionate. When a politician uses such a prescription, not only does he give himself a bad name, he also risks provoking his opponent to tell him, "Look, if you stop telling lies about me, I'll promise to stop telling truths about you."

Come to think of it, having said all these, there is no other discipline that equips a person more adequately for the role of a physician than politics. ■

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):376-9.