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Pre-dinner Address by Dr Balaji Sadasivan, Minister of State (Health & Environment) at the SMA Annual Dinner, 27 April 2002, Shangri-la Hotel

Editor's Note:

As the address was given off the cuff, the following is a transcript based on memory.

Dr Lee Suan Yew, President – Singapore Medical Council;
 Prof Low Cheng Hock, President – Singapore Medical Association;
 Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My wife, Swan and I thank you for your invitation. I am honoured to be your guest and to be asked to say a few words to such a distinguished audience. To the many here who were my teachers and mentors, doctors who molded my mind, and guided my career and taught me the ethics of our profession, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you.

Medicine is not a trade but a profession, a noble profession that ministers to the sick and dying. The values of the medical profession are universal; they transcend history, differences between cultures, political systems and governments. It is based on the universal humanistic belief of man's duty to help his fellow men.

When we became doctors, we inherited this heritage and the values of our profession were transmitted to us by the generation of doctors before us. We in turn, must live up to its expectations as best as we can and transmit the values of our profession to the next generation. Central to the institutionalization of these values are the medical organizations like



Smiling for the camera outside the Island Ballroom (from L-R): Prof Low Cheng Hock, Dr & Mrs Balaji Sadasivan, Mrs & Dr Yue Wai Mun.



Members of the SMA Council and the President of the Malaysian Medical Association (from L-R): Dr Yue Wai Mun, Dr Tham Tat Yean, Datuk Dr N. Athimulam (President, MMA), Dr Wong Chiang Yin, Dr Lim Teck Beng, Prof Low Cheng Hock.



Happy faces at the Dinner (from L-R): Prof & Mrs Chee Yam Cheng, Mrs & Dr Tan Yew Ghee, A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean.



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the Singapore Medical Association, the Academy of Medicine and the College of Family Practitioners. These institutions form the infrastructural backbone of our profession and are responsible for promoting high standards in the art and science of medicine.

Medicine is a science. Guidelines on the management of diseases and the best practices in medicine must be developed on scientific principles of evidence, debated in open forums, be subject to peer review, and be published in medical journals open to refute or refinement by all. That is the nature of the science of medicine. It is the function of medical organizations to do this. It is the function of the journals that you publish to provide peer review and allow for dissenting views.

A vibrant medical scientific community provides a balanced view for policy making in government, protects the public from charlatans and bad science, and will be part of the infrastructure of research and development in the life sciences industry. We are investing millions in the bricks and mortar of the *Biopolis*, but without good science and a proper scientific culture, the development of the life sciences will be retarded. We therefore need strong medical organizations to promote the science of medicine.

Medicine is an art. We do not live in an ideal world. Every patient is

unique. A doctor when looking after his patient must take into consideration all factors before advising or treating his patient. That is why medicine is an art. But central to the art of medicine is the duty of the doctor to always do his best for his patient and advise with the patient's interest at heart. The patient's interest must always be paramount.

Earlier this month, I was asked in Parliament whether doctors will sacrifice the patient's interest when implementing the over-stayers policy. I assured Parliament that doctors will always be professional. They will always make decisions in the best interest of the patient. They will not discharge an unfit patient from the hospital because of the over-stayers policy.

In fact, policy-makers want doctors to be professional as our health policy depends on doctors always being professional. Our health policy depends on the premise that while administrators will be driven by the bottom-line and aim for efficiency, doctors will be guided by their duty to the patient and ensure every patient receives appropriate treatment. If both do their part, we will have an efficient system that provides quality care to the public.

The quality of care is not dependent on the correct treatment but also on the empathy and understanding that the doctor shows for his patient. This ability

to empathize, comfort, and show care is an art. We therefore need strong medical organizations to promote professional ethics and the art of medicine.

Our medical organizations can be strengthened. The membership of the SMA is only about sixty percent of doctors. Twenty percent of specialists are not members of the Academy. Not every GP is a member of the College of Family Practitioners. We can do better.

I urge the leaders of the medical community, the leadership of the Singapore Medical Association, the College of Family Practitioners, and the Academy of Medicine to study ways of strengthening the medical organizations that form the backbone of the medical profession. All doctors should join their relevant medical organizations and play an active part in these organizations.

My Ministry has recently won an award for service excellence. We are committed to providing excellent service to the public and all service-providers in the area of healthcare. If you need help in remaking your organizations, you can ask my Ministry for help. We wish medical organizations that form the infrastructure of the medical profession to fulfill their roles in a manner that benefits all doctors and patients, Singapore and Singaporeans.

Thank you. ■