

Compulsory CME

When I read the ST Editorial of 23 July, headline "Shame on Doctors", I felt a stab in my heart. It hurts, and it hurts badly. I wondered, "How can someone with a stroke of a pen deal such a striking blow to our honoured profession!!!"

The ST Editor has a right to interpret the statistics the way he did. He has the prerogative to comment the way he chose to. We cannot fault him for just looking superficially at the figures. Nevertheless, my heart aches...

The thrust of the editorial headline was that "only 40% of doctors have achieved CME points to update themselves – shame on you!"

This simplistic interpretation and conclusion reminds me of the saying "You can interpret a cup filled to half mark as 'half full' or 'half empty'".

Could not someone have said, "It is good news to our people that doctors in Singapore are leading in the field of self-upgrading. It is heartening to the public that the medical professional body is to impose compulsory CME to ensure quality of practice. Singapore is among the few countries worldwide to self-regulate CME, and it is joining several first world countries to introduce compulsory CME for its doctors. Constant self-education and upgrading will help Singapore in its goal to be an international medical hub." Already more than 40% of her doctors (nearly half) have submitted their records to the Singapore Medical Council (SMC) VOLUNTARILY! Does that not sound more reassuring to our public and for the image of Singapore?

The second feeling that came to my mind on reading the ST Editorial was one of sadness and despair. I felt deeply sorry for all my colleagues and our profession.

I felt sorry for the poor House Officers and Medical Officers struggling through the nights, facing torrents of demands from patients, and the wrath of their seniors.

I felt sorry for the Registrars who stay awake all night and still have to work the next day, without a half day off.

I felt sorry for the Consultants who have to teach, train and take responsibility for all the actions of their staff.

I felt sorry for the Private Specialists who have to wake up at 3 am and rush to attend to all the needs of their patients.

I felt sorry for the Family Physicians, especially the solo HDB heartlanders, who have to struggle through 12 to 14 hours of work each day, before going home exhausted, with little time left for their home, family, and CME.

I felt sorry for all those who have strove hard to put medicine in Singapore on the world map.

And for all these, because of one "apparent deficiency" of the "40%" figure, we hear "Shame on doctors"! How harsh is the world of reality – but we must labour on.

The truth of the matter is: CME is part and parcel of our life. When one takes up medicine, learning becomes a life-long practice. I dare say all doctors have been practising some form of CME all their lives. It's just that they are not formally recorded.

Incidentally, that 40% figure quoted refers to doctors who **have submitted voluntarily** to SMC. There are many doctors who have participated but have not submitted all their records as it is not yet mandatory to record their CME points. All doctors in institutions would have met their 25 points simply from their routine meetings, lectures, morbidity rounds, etc. in the hospital setting. Most, if not all, of our colleagues in the private sector have through regular attendance of medical talks, self-reading, update, etc. achieved the number of points. Hence my own estimate is that the majority has achieved the CME requirement, but has not documented it. I have absolute confidence that with proper submission and recording, a vast majority, if not all, would achieve the CME requirement.

We all agree that CME is absolutely necessary to keep ourselves abreast of the constant new knowledge descending upon us. The question is how to ensure CME requirements are realistic, flexible and achievable by all practitioners.

For the institution doctors, the CME requirement is fairly easy to achieve. But for some private practitioners, especially the solo HDB doctors working long and tiring hours into the wee hours of the night, they may have some difficulties. We must be realistic, and it is the duty and responsibility of the professional bodies to ensure that the needs of all members are catered for. The SMC CME Coordinating Committee, with representatives from the professional

bodies, had tried to ensure this is met, and as the Chairman (Prof Lee Eng Hin) has pointed out, the Committee will look at all feedback and make adjustments where necessary so as to ensure that CME is achievable in a realistic way.

In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971): "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

CME is here to stay – we accept that and that cannot change. It is good for our survival. But the method, the system, and the way of implementation are not cast in stone. Through our representation on the SMC CME Coordinating Committee, we will reflect the ground problems as and when they arise. All feedback will be useful in determining how CME should best be implemented. Over time we hope CME will be a way of life, and should be manageable, appropriate, useful and beneficial. And all these will translate into better patient care. A well-informed doctor is one of the best insurance for the health of our patients.

Let us take a lesson from the ST Editorial: Let us not look at it as a criticism, but let us learn from it and take it as a reminder to our profession.

It is our responsibility to ensure that we are all up-to-date in our professional knowledge so as to serve our patients better. It is our duty to treat, to serve and to teach. It is also our role to ensure that the next generation of doctors will be greater than the past, and always in tune with the visions of the future – for the glory of the profession and the benefit of our patients – viva la medics!

In conclusion I hope the following 'Ode' in response to "shame" will help to soothe the spirit and the soul, and lessen the ache.

*"Don't cry for us Singapore,
On our shoulders rest the health of our nation.
We, the medics, will not fail you,
My beloved country."*

*"Weep not for us, my dear nation,
In hardship we have plodded
In faith we will serve,
This much we assure – WE WILL KEEP
ABREAST and more."* ■

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