

The Year in Retrospect

By Prof Low Cheng Hock, President, 43rd SMA Council*

Editorial Note:

The Opening Address by Prof Low Cheng Hock, President, 43rd SMA Council, at the 43rd SMA Annual General Meeting on 30 Mar 2003 is reproduced below.

The year past has certainly been a very challenging one filled with several planned and unexpected events. I have grouped the highlights of the year under Empowerment, Relational and Other activities.

A. EMPOWERMENT ACTIVITIES

These activities empower the medical profession to practise with confidence. The strategies have been information, courses, and timely advice and action.

1. COMPULSORY CME

The Minister of Health announced on 19 Jul 2002, that Continuing Medical Education (CME) will be made compulsory from 2003 onwards, and all doctors will be required to accumulate at least 50 CME points within a 2-year cycle before they are allowed to renew their practising certificate.

This was followed by an Editorial in the Straits Times, which made the simplistic conclusion from the Minister's speech, that only 40% of doctors in Singapore had earned CME points to update themselves. The SMA, together with the College of Family Physicians Singapore (CFPS) and the Academy of Medicine (AM), sent a clarification to the ST Forum page, to explain that the 40% referred to doctors who had officially documented their CME activities with the Singapore Medical Council (SMC). Hence, the proportion of doctors who participate in CME is much higher than the 40% quoted.

The SMA had also worked closely with the SMC, CFPS and AM, on the updating of the SMC CME website, and the revision of the CME Guide.

The SMA, on its part, continues to organise monthly seminars on Medical Ethics, Health Laws and Practice Management in SGH and TTSH. These Category 1A seminars are accredited with 1 CME point each. A member who attends all of these seminars in a year, will be able to receive 18 CME points.

2. PROFESSIONAL INDEMNITY

i. UMP Financial Crisis in May 2003

A summary of the events and initiatives undertaken by the SMA Council is as follows:

- Extraordinary Council Meetings were held to deliberate and set direction on the actions to be taken.
- UMP members were updated through statements on the SMA website, circulars and the SMA News.
- Representations were made, on behalf of Singapore UMP members, to the Australian High Commissioner and UMP Provisional Liquidator. The attempt to request for return of funds in the Singapore Dollar account in Sydney was unfruitful. The Provisional Liquidator was

also unresponsive to our repeated requests for provision of nose cover for Singapore UMP Members

- Arrangements were made with MPS and NTUC for "nose cover".
- Advice was received from the SMA Honorary Legal Advisors that SMA, being not a creditor of UMP, has no legal standing.
- Assistance was sought from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to make representation, on behalf of Singapore UMP members, to the Australian counterparts.
- A Dialogue Session was held with UMP members in Sep 2002, which resulted in the formation of the UMP Medical Defence Workgroup.
- Subscriptions received between Feb to Apr 2002, held pending confirmation of coverage, were refunded to members in Oct 2002, after UMP confirmed they were not providing coverage to doctors in this group.
- The SMA Council pledged financial support of up to S\$10,000 for consulting an Australian legal Counsel, and secretariat support were provided to the UMP Medical Defence Workgroup.
- Support was provided for Dr Lily Neo's initiative to present Singapore UMP members' situation to Australian government officials.

ii. Cooperation Agreement with MPS

The SMA Council finalised the cooperation agreement with the MPS, which will take effect from 1 Mar 2003. The new agreement stipulates the agency commission to SMA at \$100 per member.

iii. NTUC Income Medical Indemnity Scheme

NTUC Income launched its medical indemnity scheme to UMP members in Jun 2002. The SMA assists in forwarding applications to NTUC Income.

3. MEDICO-LEGAL ISSUES

The report of the Workgroup on Avoiding Medical Accidents and Improving Patient Information (formerly, "Reducing Medical Accidents & Improving Patient Information") has been completed recently, after much handwork by the Workgroup, under the leadership of the Workgroup Chairman A/Prof Goh Lee Gan.

Copies of the Executive Summary are available from the SMA Secretariat. Interested members may also request for the full report from the Secretariat.

4. PRACTICE RELATED ISSUES

With regards to autoclaves, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) reported an accident involving a clinic autoclave in Jan 2002.

The MOM announced the amendment of the Factories Act, which has been renamed as "Factories and Other Workplaces Act". We understand the Act will be introduced in 2003. At the briefing to announce the new Act, SMA representatives submitted suggestions to MOM with regards to the procedure for repair of autoclaves.

5. CONTINUING MEDICAL EDUCATION

The SMA Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism (CMEP) continues to organise the following CME activities during the year:

- National Medical Convention – The theme last year was “Effective Health Screening – What you must know.” For the upcoming Convention on 12 and 13 Apr 2003, the theme is “Home Healthcare”. (Postponed until further notice.)
- Annual Ethics Convention – Held in Nov 2002, the theme was “Improving Patient Safety and Outcome with Ethics and Professionalism”.
- Ongoing monthly seminars at SGH PGMI and TTSH.
- Practice Management Seminars.

6. ADVISORIES/STATEMENTS ISSUED

The SMA was invited to give its views on the ethical issue of organ transplant to the National Medical Ethics Council (NMEC) and the Ministry of Health.

The SMA also continues to publish information and advice on ethical and practice issues in the SMA News.

7. PUBLICATIONS & RELATED ACTIVITIES

i. The principal publications of the SMA remain the

- SMJ (monthly)
- SMA News (monthly)
- Sensory (bimonthly) – The first survey conducted in 2002 had yielded much useful feedback from the readers which helped us to focus on topics that are of interest to our readers. We are also grateful to our sponsors for their support by offering prizes for our lucky draws. We urge all members to actively support this publication by giving their suggestions/feedback, without which we would not be able to make it a better publication for you.

ii. SMA CMEP Publication: “Medical Malpractice in Singapore” by Prof SY Tan

The SMA Council is of the opinion that it is a good publication for practising doctors and medical undergraduates, and decided to sponsor the publication of the book. Prof Tan had also donated the publishing rights to the book.

As a token of appreciation, the SMA will present each member one free copy of the book, upon payment of their 2003 subscriptions. Additional copies of the book are available for sale at the SMA Secretariat. Proceeds from the sale will be channelled to the SMA CMEP fund.

8. MEDICAL INFORMATICS

i. IT Courses

The Basic Internet Training and IT Power Basic courses organised by SMA have received good responses. We intend to organise more training courses in this year, including more advanced training and refresher courses, if required.

ii. IT Equipment & Services

We are glad to be able to secure quality IT equipment and services at preferential rates. We will continue to negotiate with suppliers for high-speed connectivity and good equipment at preferential rates.

iii. Survey on IT Adoption

A “Survey on IT Adoption Among Doctors in Singapore” was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Health in October 2002. The results show that doctors are generally IT-savvy, with younger doctors embracing the PDAs and senior doctors preferring the laptops and desktops. Findings also show a demand for broadband connectivity. We will work on this area in the coming year.

iv. SMA Website

The SMA website is updated regularly, and one of the latest features is the option to extract a condensed version of CME activities, according to specified periods and specialties.

B. RELATIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. MEETINGS

The SMA Council continues to meet with the Director of Medical Services on various issues.

In Nov 2002, the SMA hosted the 10th MASEAN Mid-Term Meeting in Singapore.

With regards to the inter-professional groups, SMA continues to maintain meaningful contacts.

C. OTHERS

Amendments to the Medical Registration Act were announced recently. Briefly, the amendments are in the following areas:

- Implementation of Compulsory CME from 1 Jan 2003;
- Strengthening of SMC’s Disciplinary Procedures;
- Registration of Medical Practitioners;
- Changes to MRA Schedule & Female Medical Student Quota.

We believe these amendments will bring the medical profession to a higher level of professionalism.

CONCLUSION

SMA’s achievements in the year past were the result of the diligence, commitment and selfless service of all our Council Members, Chairmen and Members of the various SMA Committees, and the SMA Secretariat staff. Special mention must also be made of our Honorary Legal Advisers, for their invaluable assistance in advising us on various issues that confronted us during the year.

My deepest appreciation and thanks goes to all of these people who have contributed so much and more to the SMA.

Thank You.

*** I am pleased to announce that the 44th SMA Council, under the leadership of Dr Lee Pheng Soon, the new SMA President, was installed on 9 Apr 2003. Dr Lee has with him an excellent and dynamic team, many of whom have years of experience and have served the SMA with total dedication, sincerity and absolute commitment. I have no hesitation in saying that more than 90% of my work were contributed by my colleagues within the Council – to them all, I am eternally indebted.**

Let us all give the new Council our total support as they face the challenges ahead.

Once again, thank you Council Members and all staff of SMA – in the service of SMA – to the doctors and the public, we serve.

LOW CHENG HOCK ■