



SMA Advisory No. 01/2003
(Issued 6 May 2003)

MEDICAL CERTIFICATION OF EXAMINEES AS "SARS-FREE"

1. CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CERTIFYING AN EXAMINEE AS "SARS-FREE"

An SMA Member has written in to point out that it is very difficult to be certain that an examinee is SARS-free, even if great care is exercised in physical examination, and all available tests are done. He notes that there are no confirmatory blood tests that we can rely on, that a chest X-ray may not be diagnostic till the illness is advanced, and finally that careful auscultation may yield no signs even in advanced lung pathology. Moreover, it is possible that a person may disguise a low-grade fever before a medical examination, simply by taking 2 tablets of paracetamol without the examining doctor's knowledge.

The SMA has been approached for advice by several Members, who had been asked to certify a person as "SARS-free" by employers. We would like to remind all Members that:

- i. Such certification has medico-legal implications, with potentially very serious consequences if there is an error;
- ii. For reasons such as detailed above, it may be possible for infected persons to be apparently healthy during the short duration of the examination;
- iii. That normal auscultation may not indicate absence of disease, and similarly CXR for early disease;
- iv. That even in the most experienced hospital units, diagnosis has sometimes been reached very late, even in patients ill enough to have a marked fever.

Therefore,

The SMA advises Members to seriously consider the above points, before certifying any examinee as "SARS-free". We advise that unless the doctor is absolutely certain, he should instead document his examination in a simple, clear, factual manner, confining his report to describing his findings.

A suggested format is included below for your consideration:

"I hereby certify that on _____ (date, time) _____ I examined _____ (name, NRIC/ID) _____ and found the following: tympanic temperature _____, respiratory system _____ (findings) _____. The Radiologist's report, attached, states _____. These results are/are not within the normal range for adults."

2. CONDUCTING NON-MEDICAL TASKS AS PART OF A CONTRACT

Some employers will require the doctor to conduct non-medical tasks as part of the same contract, e.g. verifying by random phone calls, and then certifying, that the examinee had stayed at home for a specified "self-quarantine" period. Though this is a non-medical matter, please remember that the doctor's certification also has medico-legal significance. Great care therefore needs to be exercised, as the doctor has no special expertise in these non-medical matters. For example, it may be difficult to answer later if he were challenged, how he could be certain the person answering the phone was the examinee in question, or even whether the number dialed had not been forwarded to another number. **Remember – the doctor is legally responsible for everything he signs against.**

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