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Judicious Approach in Medical Practice

Editorial Note:

The SMA Lecture 2003 was delivered by Dr Lee Suan Yew, President, Singapore Medical Council, on 1 November 2003 (Saturday), at the Suntec International Convention and Exhibition Centre. We publish here the highlights from Dr Lee's lecture. The full paper will be published in the Singapore Medical Journal at a later date. For the citation of the SMA Lecturer, please see page 6.

Dr Lee started the SMA Lecture by defining his use of "judicious" in the context of "exercising sound judgement, being prudent, sensible and wise in our approach when practising medicine. "Medical practitioners" need to adopt a judicious approach in the care of our patients so as to address their health problems effectively and compassionately. Such an approach will also do much to reduce the likelihood of patients' unhappiness leading to complaints or medico-legal action against the doctor."

I. JUDICIOUS APPROACH IN PATIENT MANAGEMENT

"It is good practice to take a good history and carry out a thorough physical examination followed by an explanation to our patients on the plan of management. ...For example, in cases when our patients require surgery, they should be informed of the pros and cons before undergoing surgery or an invasive procedure. The art is skilful communication that highlights the important points and which meets the concerns of the patient and relatives."

"As patients are better educated, it is important to find common ground regarding the management of our patients. ...the physician has to be careful in not being too domineering in attitude but to be the provider of evidence-based medical knowledge and advice so that an informed decision can be made."

"When there is trust and excellent rapport with our patients, it is most unlikely that the patients would complain or contemplate suing their doctors. It is when we are unconcerned, with poor empathy towards our patients' illnesses that the seed of discontent is planted. This is likely to surface if things go wrong, for example,



(From left to right) Dr Lee Pheng Soon presents the SMA Lecturer 2003, Dr Lee Suan Yew, with the SMA Lecturer Gold Medal.

if complications arise during an operation which is then followed by high medical or surgical fees."

Over-prescribing of Drugs

"Doctors may from time to time encounter patients who repeatedly consult them for insomnia and request for sleeping pills or tranquilisers. A doctor must be aware of the pitfalls of over-prescribing to such patients and becoming just a "pill pedlar" for financial gain. Taking a proper history and clinical examination are necessary at every visit. Every effort should be made to counsel these patients and refer them to the appropriate specialists where necessary."

Maid Examination

"In a letter to the Forum Page of the Straits Times dated 30 October 2003, Dr Lee Pheng Soon stated that "The beta-hCG blood test detects pregnancies earliest, is reliable after the first couple of weeks, is the most sensitive means for routine screening, and arguably should be



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Therefore, although blood test for pregnancy is not mandatory, doctors could use it to exclude pregnancy when he suspects that the FDW is pregnant or if he was uncertain of her menstrual history, if consent is obtained.

the test to be used routinely in statutory examinations...

Therefore, although blood test for pregnancy is not mandatory, doctors could use it to exclude pregnancy when he suspects that the FDW is pregnant or if he was uncertain of her menstrual history, if consent is obtained."

Terminally-ill Patients

"The doctor should help the relatives understand the medical situation, address their anxieties and concerns, and decide on a course of action which would be in the patient's best interest. In complex cases, the opinion of the hospital ethics committee should be sought as an independent view by professionals not intimately involved in the management of the patient is often very valuable. However, should emotionally-charged relatives, despite counselling and explanation of the hopeless prognosis, instruct the care-givers not to spare any effort or cost to save a terminally-ill patient, then there is no choice but to acquiesce to their wishes."

Advance Medical Directive (AMD)

"As medical practitioners, we are in an ideal position to judiciously encourage certain of our senior patients to sign the AMD form while they are compos mentis. By doing so, it will avoid any ambiguity in the future management of many of our terminally-ill patients. This not only saves costs for the family concerned but it will save unnecessary suffering to both patients and their immediate relatives."

II. JUDICIOUS APPROACH IN MEDICAL PRACTICE IN THE COMMUNITY

Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA)

"Doctors have an important role to play in encouraging their patients to become organ donors. They should

familiarise themselves with the latest developments in the field of organ and tissue transplantation so that they will be able to provide answers when patients and their families raise their concerns."

Advertising

"On 20 October 2003, Acting Minister for Health, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, launched the "SingaporeMedicine", a concept reviving the dream of re-making Singapore into a regional medical hub. In order that the potential patients in the region be kept informed of our medical services, it entails some form of advertising. We need to strike a balance here. While we want Singapore to be a regional medical hub, we should still be judicious in the way we promote our medical services. The medical profession must maintain its decorum and dignity. Otherwise, we will be equated with the trades and tradesmen that promote their wares."

III. JUDICIOUS APPROACH IN MEDICAL PRACTICE IN THE INSTITUTIONS

Emergency Medicine

"Certain incidents in an emergency management may attract litigation. Some incidents are unavoidable but some may be due to negligence. The key to avoiding law suits is good training, good teamwork and taking due care to assess the medical situation properly."

Conflicts of Interest

"One has to be vigilant in avoiding situations where there may be conflicts of interest. For example, over-servicing of patients induced by the desire to maximise revenues from expensive medical equipment in hospital; in physicians consciously or inadvertently promoting pharmaceutical products of a pharmaceutical company because the company sponsors the institution's research programme or certain scientific meetings. Doctors working in institutions should be judicious in accepting sponsorships of overseas trips by commercial companies. It is fine if the invitation is to give a lecture or demonstration but it should not include a holiday-cum-golf, cum-fine dining and various perks whereby the doctor becomes beholden to the company."

"We certainly need to work closely with pharmaceutical companies. They play an important role in our medical practice. Besides, we should continue to do research with them and thereby advance our medical care as co-partners. However, we must be ever mindful of maintaining a correct relationship with them, to prevent conflicts of interests from arising in our practice." ■

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