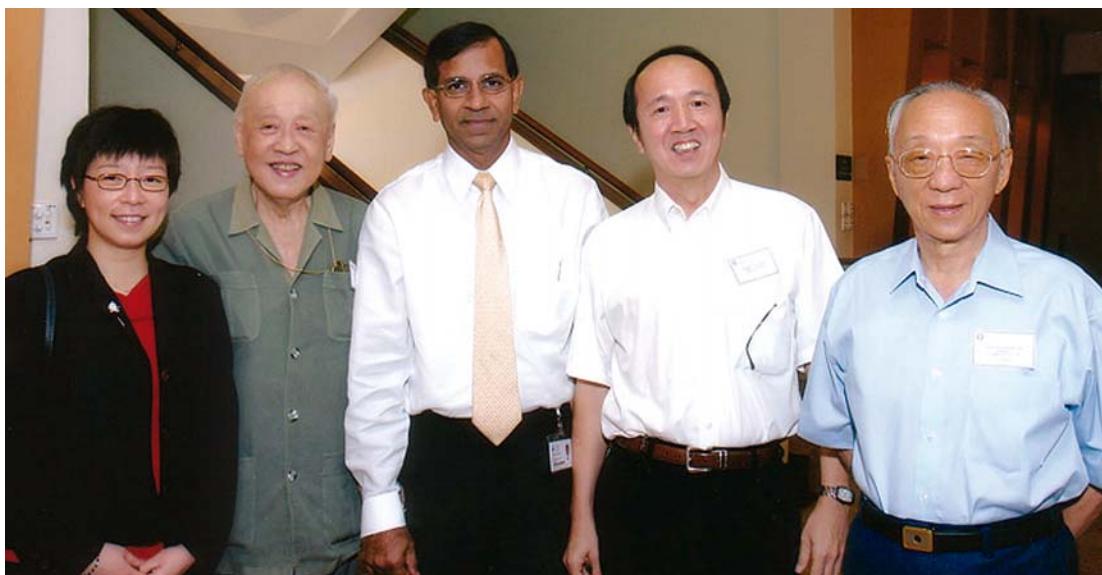


Sharing Concerns in Healthcare



Gathered at the foyer before lunch. (L-R) Dr Wong Moh Sim, Dr Chee Phui Hung, Prof K Satkunanantham, Dr Wong Kai Peng, and Dr Wong Kwok Yun.

Editorial note:

The following speech was delivered by Dr Chee Phui Hung at a lunch gathering hosted by the Alumni Association, to honour the New Director of Medical Services (DMS), Prof K Satkunanantham, on 22 April 2004, at the Arthur Lim Auditorium, Alumni Medical Centre.

May I add my welcome to Prof Satku as the Director of Medical Services. I do not know whether to congratulate him or to commiserate with him. Congratulations are in order as he has now assumed the highest position in the medical profession. On the other hand, I commiserate with him for having left the serene academia in the ivory tower of the University, to the rough and tumble, and the hurly burly of the Ministry of Health where problems never seem to cease, such as managed care, cost of medical services, and trying to retain our status as the medical hub. All these are his headaches, not ours.

I will now touch upon three things which are of great relevance to us. First is the role and the meaning of the Director of Medical Services. In the olden days, long established, you get the DMS/PS, now you have DMS and PS. The separation of these two posts of course means that the political and administrative matters are in one hand and the medical services on the other. This afternoon, we are concentrating our attention on Prof Satku as the DMS, and we hope that by coming to this gathering consisting of all segments of the medical profession, he will be able to understand that we look up to him as the

arbiter and the promoter of medical service, and in the last resort, to defend and protect us against intrusion from political people and otherwise.

The second point is the proliferation of non-medical personnel in the service. I do not know how many of you are in hospitals or go to hospitals. You see a lot of people fluttering around, and when you ask who they are, you are told that "Oh, they are the administrators." The perception is that they are increasing more and more. Arthur Lim, when we invited the Acting Minister for Health, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, for dinner, said that there are 200 of such people in each cluster, and asked whether they are there to improve the service or to cut cost in the service? Therefore, it is important for our DMS to see that the quality of service is not sacrificed to the cost of service.

The third point is another perception, the low morale of the doctors. We have seen recently there are many resignations of doctors including senior ones. Is this cyclical or structural? What is the push or pull factor? These are problems that concern all of us and they should concern the DMS. I have heard that one of the senior doctors was told that he was responsible for not making money in the previous year. As a consequence, he resigned. So we want to know whether it is more important to think of the quality of care rather than the cost. Of course, they say it is the efficiency of the service. We do not want to have MBAs running the show; they can go and run Singapore Airlines for all I care. The medical service deals with people not when they are healthy and high living, but when they are sick and dying. They must have

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empathy for the patients, and if we are not careful, doctors might be reduced to digits in the service, as technicians and patient interfaces. In the old style of practising medicine, there is this rapport between patients and doctors. It seems this is fast disappearing. There is the perception of the morale being slowly eroded in the service. There is also grumbling in the private sector about the steps that the Ministry has taken which we think is competitive. Of course, they say it is complementary. So these are the three points that I want to bring out.

Now in a lighter vein, I was told by Wong Sze Tai that Prof Satku was very active as an undergraduate, particularly in extra-curricular activities like lining up freshmen in front of the nurses' quarters to sing the medical version of "Daisy, Daisy". How many of you do not know this version? I would love to tell you about it. We are glad that he has undergone such a time as an undergraduate. It reminds me of what I was 60 years ago. We hope that in assuming his position as the new Director of Medical Services, having gone through the whole experience of undergraduate ragging and housemanship, up to the Head of Orthopaedics, he will understand all the trials and tribulations of a doctor. Later, as Master of the Academy, I am sure he must have had confrontations with the previous DMS. Now, he is on the receiving end himself and we look upon

him as someone who can understand the problems of the medical profession.

Gathered here today at the main table are the top people in all the medical institutions: Singapore Medical Association, Singapore Dental Association, Pharmaceutical Society of Singapore, Academy of Medicine, College of Family Physicians, and Association of Women Doctors. We invited the President of the Association of the Women Doctors so that we could not be accused of being chauvinistic males. And I even invited Prof Lim Pin, who has gone from medicine to being the Vice-Chancellor of the University, and who was incidentally Prof Satku's boss, and now back to becoming Professor in the University. The wealth of experience and people that he can count upon to help him are there. We offer him our goodwill and all our help. He must look upon us as his constituents, and therefore he should meet us regularly like the political people do, maybe once in three months or so. Come and meet us. We are a friendly crowd and we are not afraid to tell you things that other people may not want to hear. We, the Alumni, have always been willing and able to host the people high up to meet us down here to discuss matters. This is a wish that we have for our DMS that he will avail himself of the opportunity to really work the ground. We welcome him and wish him smooth sailing as the DMS, in spite of the waves that he could encounter from us from time to time. ■