

# Health Law & Ethics as Core Competencies

By Dr Chin Jing Jih, Organising Chairman



Prof K Satku, Director of Medical Services (seated) and Dr Lee Pheng Soon, President of SMA (standing).



Over 60 clinician leaders and senior administrators from the healthcare institutions attended the two-day course.

A healthcare organisation today is a complex organism involving various different stakeholders, sometimes with conflicting priorities as a result of their different roles in the organisation. Nevertheless, healthcare delivery and medical treatment remain the primary goals, and therefore policies and practices of a healthcare organisation have to be consistent and compatible with the code of ethics of the medical profession and observe the limits prescribed by the local health legislation. Clinician leaders and senior healthcare managers must therefore ensure that their policies and decisions reflect a common endeavour towards offering healthcare services in an ethical, legal and professional manner. A reasonable working knowledge and sound understanding of health law and medical ethics should therefore be core competencies for clinician leaders and senior healthcare administrators.

It is with these concerns in mind that SMA, together with Singapore General Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital, organised a short course on medical ethics and health law, designed specifically for clinician leaders and senior healthcare administrators. This was held on 4 and 5 November 2004 at the Furama Riverfront Singapore. The two-day course aimed to equip participants with a working knowledge of clinical ethics and local health statutes, as well as exposing them to commonly encountered ethical and legal issues in Singapore. It was hoped that the acquired knowledge would help

participants both in their decision- and policy-making as leaders in their institutions. For the clinicians, it is envisaged that the course will also equip them with the necessary concepts and vocabulary to teach and guide young doctors when dealing with ethical and legal issues in their practice.

The course was honoured by the presence of the Director of Medical Services, Prof K Satku, who, after officiating the opening ceremony, stayed on as an active participant on both days. In his short and affirming speech, he also announced that "We (MOH) aim to introduce a few compulsory modules on these core competency skills which all specialist trainees would have to undergo before they exit from specialist training. We hope to extend this to the Undergraduate training curriculum as well, in due course. This is but a small step in our pursuit to raise and maintain the level of professionalism of our doctors." This was a clear and definitive endorsement of SMA's long held perspective on the pivotal role played by ethics and professionalism in medicine and healthcare.

The teaching faculty of the course consisted of a panel of well-qualified local speakers, who generously shared their expertise and experience, covering a wide range of topics. The statutes covered included the Private Hospitals and Medical Clinics (PHMC) Act with a special focus on the new Publicity Rules, the Medical Registration Act, the Infectious Diseases Act, and the Human Organ Transplant Act, just to name a few. Topics on medical ethics included the SMC Ethical Code, medical privacy and confidentiality, and organisational ethics. For most of the statutes, corresponding topics in medical ethics followed closely. For example, the lecture on the Mental Disorders and Treatment Act was followed shortly by a talk on ethical issues and institutional policies in the treatment of mentally incompetent patients. There were also lectures on topics of interest such as the role of ethics consultation service, medical risk management and managing conflicts of interest in healthcare organisations. Most lectures were followed by lively sessions of question and answer from a highly enthused audience, reflecting the many uncertainties and controversies in issues related to health law and ethics, even among senior clinicians and administrators.

From the feedback received, both written and verbal, we are heartened to know that most participants found the course effective in providing them with a greater understanding of the important health laws and healthcare ethics in Singapore. Most felt that the course should be repeated in the coming years for their colleagues who have missed the opportunity this year. For those of us who organised the course, we are glad that we were able to meet the course objectives and received favourable feedback from the participants, and we look forward to organising similar courses in future on a regular basis. ■