

Privileged – Reflections

By Dr Boon Seng Poh

“I cannot understand why our young doctors are so unhappy these days. We should look at it as a privilege to be able to see patients.”

I remember attending a Continuing Medical Education lecture many years ago and heard a very senior doctor saying this to a younger one at the lunch table. I regret not being able to remember who said this and that I have not understood its meaning fully until now.

Amidst the recent commotion that resulted from media reports, we should perhaps take a step back and re-examine our role and function as a doctor. An unfamiliar person may read the responses and think that we are truly just businessmen, as suggested, who are frustrated when part of our trade will be taken away soon.

THE CALLING

Our role has never been meant to be a businessman or to sell medicines for profit, and certainly not to serve ourselves simply to fill our ‘rice bowls’. Aren’t we just folks who have chosen to be trained in medicine so that we can provide care and comfort to those who seek it from us? Isn’t our job as simple as one human helping another; and because we are fortunate to be in a better physical state, and hopefully mentally as well, so that we can provide help and care. Aren’t the patients that we care for also our teachers from whom we learn during their suffering? Isn’t it so that our job is known as a ‘medical practice’?

So, let us be happy that we can relieve suffering, learn from it, and at the same time earn a living. No other membership offers such privileges, so do not leave home without this medical fraternity membership. If we see this as our role, then there is essentially no difference, in essence, whether patients purchase their medications from the prescribing doctor or anybody else. The primary role of the doctor remains unchanged. He will still diagnose, try to remove the cause, alleviate the symptoms, prevent complications, monitor progress and discharge when appropriate. He will still order what he deems most appropriate for the patient at each time of contact.

SUNSET BOULEVARD?

“Private practice? GP? Solo? It’s a sunset industry!” Cautions some concerned friends and colleagues. A classmate working in a famous group practice said during an SMA Annual Dinner: “Solo practice will be extinct in five years’ time.” This proclamation and prophecy sent chills down the spines of many at the table. All of them may be correct. Who knows?

So, we ask: Why are there doctors who still choose to walk along this lonely path named ‘Sunset Boulevard’? For

me, like many others I hope, it was for its privileges. There are obvious benefits – we are bosses to our employees; we plan and approve our own leave; we go to work and leave for home at our own chosen time. But, these are not the important ones. I became a solo GP after completing my bond with the government and worked for a group practice. I think I have seen it all. There was no better choice and I am happy now.

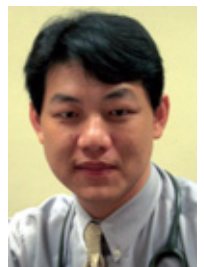
Everyday, I meet patients who call of their own free will and trust. I give them unbiased opinions based on my observations, experiences and true beliefs. I suggest the most appropriate solutions without wasting time considering profit margins. I waive and reduce fees without forms to fill. I see patients improve and they, in turn, help my practice (and family) survive with their patient referrals. There are no arguments with clinic managers when more time is needed to listen and talk with patients, and no annoying phonecalls and faxes should bosses get upset about undercharging. There are no supervisor’s will to do just for the posting assessments. And I do not have to be the punching bag when the patient and family are upset with the institution and its system. If these are not enough to be called privileges, consider this – I sharpen the skills that were generously taught to me when I apply them on my patients, from head to toe, so they do not become vestibular and just ornamental.

MANAGING WHOSE HEALTH?

The old issue of managed healthcare and its banes has also been brought up by many. The question is why do these doctors participate or even work for anyone who succumbs to such schemes; and thereby suffer willingly? Is it monetary returns? Those who complain about suffering should leave the scheme; those who stay with it have to learn to enjoy their own choice.

Leave it to our leaders, the authorities and the public to decide the best drug delivery model. Just be honest with ourselves and our patients, and fulfill our original role.

If all doctors pause and reflect upon our roles, I am sure all will enjoy a Very Happy Chinese New Year, knowing that someone’s sufferings have been lessened by our daily efforts. So, cheer up folks! ■



About the author:

Dr Boon Seng Poh graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1994. He runs a solo GP practice and is married with two boys.