

# A Proposal for An Integrated Medical Centre

By Dr Wong Wee Nam

To the President of Singapore Medical Association

Dear Sir,

You must have realised by now that doctors in Singapore are suffering, not just from a drastic loss of income, but a marked drop in their status as well. If we do not do anything to stop this slide, our medical profession is going to reach a terminal stage.

My fears are not imaginary. The signs and symptoms are too glaring to be missed. In the past, amongst the respected professions, doctors ranked very high and politicians ranked very low. Now it is the reverse. Our status in the community has dipped to an abysmal level. Gone are the days when society put us on a high pedestal and worshipped us. Patients now sue their doctors at the slightest mishap, and even the normally docile and obedient reporters will not hesitate to write derogatory things about us.

Nowadays, even hawkers have lost their respect for doctors. Not so long ago, my hawkers used to greet me respectfully and served me before others. This was because to patronise their stall was a great honour to them. Now they would not even "hew" me. I just have to join the queue and carry the food to the table myself. Even the portion they serve me has been reduced. Where they used to give me two extra slices of prawn for my noodles, now they give me a slice less. Just in case you do not know, not having practised in a HDB estate, slices of prawns are the market indices of a person's standing in the community.

Alas, who am I to complain? After all, a lot of them now drive new cars while I am still driving one that no longer has a scrape value. I thought I was the only person who had suffered such ignominy. But from an unofficial survey which I conducted at a CME lunch talk, I can safely conclude that it is a generalised affliction spread across the board.

My good friend, Dr Choke, related his humiliating experience. He used to have an unofficial parking lot in front of his clinic in a HDB estate. This was because his status used to be such that the neighbours, in deference to him, avoided using that lot. Nowadays, however, nobody cares. He consoles himself that it may be a good thing. People now think that he drives different cars, including a pickup van, to work on different days and that he also owns a construction company.

Times really have changed. The vets and Chinese *sinehs* are now earning more than the doctor. The doctor charges one hundred dollars for a death certificate while the vet charges three hundred dollars to cremate a hamster. One surgeon told me he can go for a two-week holiday and when he comes back, his list still remains the same. On the other hand, his vet's list is always longer than his.

There is a crisis in medicine and something needs to be done. If we do not change with time, we have only ourselves to blame. We need to change our mindset to meet the challenges of changing times. In this respect, the Chinese *sinehs* are smarter than we are. In theory, rapid technological advances in Western medicine should have extinguished them long ago. Yet they have survived and, may I add, even thriving. This is because they are willing to adapt. If they had stubbornly decided to remain "traditional" and continue to diagnose patients by feeling their pulses and prescribe dried leaves and twigs, they would have been wiped out. But no, they have wisely forgone "tradition" and now use the stethoscope, do blood tests, use x-rays and encapsulated drugs to help them manage patients. In changing with the times and their mindset, they have remade themselves.

For a long time now, our doctors have only treated acne with all the different types of acne preparations. The beauticians, in spite of their limitations, have managed to gain a substantial portion of this skin care pie with all kinds of mud. Some have even raised their standing by having a "Dr" title conferred on them by some strange foreign university. One even had the audacity to complain to my friend Dr Choke that some doctors are encroaching onto her professional turf. Let us stop sneering at them. They must also be skin experts or our female colleagues would not see them for facial treatments instead of our dermatologists.

Before I go on to my proposal, I must first declare that I have played *chap ji kee*, 4D, Toto, football pools and have visited casinos in Las Vegas, Reno, Sun City, Genting, Virgo, Burswood, Monaco and others. I am, however, not what you would call a gambler.

Let me also give you a Shakespearean warning: "if you have tears, prepare to shed them now!" This is because what I am about to propose wrenches my heart as well as my conscience and I am sure it will yours as well. But what can we do? We have to be more pragmatic and less 'hippocratical', if we want to survive.

Imagine if we were to allow clinics to install jackpot machines in the waiting room. The benefits would be tremendous. First, doctors' income would rise tremendously. Secondly it will benefit our patients because earnings from the machines would allow the



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doctors to charge their patients less and subsidise the poor. Thirdly, doctors would practise good medicine since they now no longer need to charge exorbitant prices for medications as some people had alleged, or over-service patients. Lastly, clinics would now cater to people who are not sick, as well as patients and tourists. At the same time, those afflicted with addiction and tennis elbow can seek instant consultation without having to travel elsewhere.

Imagine the economic gains to our hospitals if jackpot machines line their lobbies. Think of the grateful patients who now no longer need to pay such hefty hospital bills as the hospitals can now afford to give generous discounts especially to the high-rollers.

It would even make more sense if we can have integrated medical centres. The cardiology department can be integrated with a fitness and spa centre. The neurology department can be integrated with a health resort. The orthopaedic centre can be integrated with a martial arts school and The Loan Sharks Credit Company. The obesity clinic can be integrated with a slimming centre. Acne and skin clinics can be integrated with beauty centres. Alopecia treatments can be integrated with hair-restoring centres. Those with erectile dysfunction and sexual counselling can watch special movies at a special theaterette. The department for sexually-transmitted diseases can be integrated with nightclubs and Geylang-like establishments. The list is endless. The potential is mind-boggling

Mr President, don't you agree that this is the future of medicine? Surely you can't afford not to say yes to my proposal?

Thank you.

Warmest regards,

Dr Said Yastoh b Gasing Noh ■



**About the author:**

*Dr Wong Wee Nam is a general practitioner and a writer who has contributed his thoughts regularly to the local newspapers and to Talkingcock.com*