

This Month's Focus:

*Past & Present***SMA**
NEWS

*The late Dr Chan Kah Poon and
A/Prof Goh in an old 1987 photo.*

The SMA News – Past & Present

By Assoc Prof Goh Lee Gan

I am honoured to be invited to contribute a piece on the SMA News as I see it through the past into the present from the perspective of a past Editor. My association with the SMA News spanned a good two and a half decades.

One day in late 1980, I received a telephone call from the SMA News Editor then, Dr John Tambyah, to meet for lunch. He said he wanted to talk about the SMA Newsletter. It was about joining him to try my hand at editing and writing. I got persuaded. Little did I anticipate then that it would be a pastime that would span the space of time into the present day.

It has been an adventure being an Editor of the SMA News from 1983 to 1998/99; and Deputy Editor in 2001/02. It was not always plain sailing though. Getting doctors to write and contribute can be challenging at times. Sometimes I helped to finish up a piece of half-completed

writing. Sometimes I ghost-wrote. It was however, not in vain. We got the SMA News going year after year. I am also glad to note that we now have more writers and Editors in our midst. I can see the SMA News is in good hands today.

WHAT STOOD OUT AS MEMORABLE

The SMA News Editorial Board Members

What stood out as memorable during my stint as Editor was the good relationship built up between me and those who I got together to sail the ship. These included members of the Editorial Board and Editorial Assistants.

I was blessed to have interesting people with whom I have formed great friendships along the way. One of my profound and prolific contributors was Professor Chee Yam Cheng. I think his grouses in his Personally Speaking column attracted the people at the helm at the Ministry of Health then and they did the right thing – they got him to join them, and the rest is history. Another long-standing friend is Dr Tan Hooi Hwa. His forte is to interview various personalities in the medical world. These included Dr Christian Barnard and Professor Eugene Braunwald. There were of course many others in my Editorial Boards, but too many to mention by name.

There were also great contributors of the Newsletter who are no longer with us. Amongst these was Dr Chan Kah Poon, who wrote under the pen name of Garfield. His series of articles is a joy to read and the humour in them will make you laugh. Sadly, we lost him to a brain tumour in February this year. Another of those departed and memorable to me was Dr Julian Wee. His loud laughter was quite distinctive and reverberated round the room. It took me quite a while to get over the loss of him. Then there was the late Dr Gopal Baratham, the neurosurgeon and prize-winning author.

The SMA News Editorial Assistants

I am also blessed to have had good Editorial Assistants throughout the years. What was memorable about them



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was that they were always helpful and could be trusted to proofread the pages and get the layouts finalised. They also had innovative ideas.

I must say a big “thank you” to them for their labour through the years. They were people like: Mr Michael Loh, Miss Elin Chan, Miss Chua Gek Eng, Miss Angeline Tan, Miss Tan Hwee Ping, Miss Ng Mei San, and Miss Krysania Tan (the present Editorial Manager).

Presidents & Councils

I made it a point not to be at loggerheads with the Presidents and members of SMA Councils. Maybe that was how I survived so many of them and sat on the Editorial Chair for so many years. I ghost-wrote some of the President’s columns. Of course, when I was President from 1999 to 2001, I did not have to do that.

I also made it a personal policy to submit my Editorial for their scrutiny and comments. I found it a good exercise to improve my writing and to understand the views of others better. Most important of all, I learnt how not to be defensive when my Editorial came back with all sorts of remarks, some kind and some not so kind.

The Gains

Perhaps the biggest personal gain in being the SMA News Editor is the ability to write on demand without the fear of writer’s block. One learns the tricks of the trade: how to say what one means more precisely, and that short sentences and paragraphs are more effective than long ones. Also, one is forced to keep up-to-date.

So, my encouragement is for everyone to try their hand at writing and editing by joining the SMA News Editorial Board. Contrary to what many of my friends think, it is not a waste of time.



The SMA News Editorial Board 2005/6: (L-R) Prof Chee Yam Cheng, Dr Tob Han Chong, Krysania Tan, Dr Terence Lim, Dr Oh Jen Jen, Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Dr Lee Chung Horn and Dr Daniel Fung. (Not in photo: Dr John Chiam and Dr Jeremy Lim.)

RECAP OF THE SMA NEWS IN 1985

In the March/April 1985 issue of the SMA News, I wrote an analysis of the SMA News. It had then been in existence for 19 years, and had a total of 108 issues. I noted the struggles of the day were the need for the Editor to be in the Council in order that he or she would be in touch with the events of the day; the longstanding struggle with the Press and unhappiness about press leaks and their adverse remarks; and whether the News should be confined to the profession.

ORGANISATIONAL CHANGES SINCE 1985

One Publication for 3 Years

From 1997 to March 2000, the SMA News was published as a supplement of the Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ). In 2000, it was felt that it would serve the function of timeliness better by being a free-standing publication, as it had mostly been in the past. Since then, it has remained so.

Moving to Online Publication in 1997

This was perhaps the biggest leap for the SMA News in the last decade. We wanted to assail the web as a full-text publication. We did it, thanks to the work of Miss Regina Chin (the SMA Webmaster). There was the hard copy in the reader’s hands and the soft copy on the SMA website, but we decided to leave the more vitriolic stuff out of the latter.

The SMJ was also available online as full-text, and was probably one of the earliest medical journals to be full-text after the New England Journal of Medicine. In the ensuing years, more journals followed suit.

1997 was thus a watershed year. We announced in the January 1998 issue of the SMA News that we had the full year’s issues of the SMA News and the SMJ on the SMA website.

Masthead Changes

Since 1996, we had two masthead changes, one in 1996 itself and another in 2000, which has been given an updated look this year.

THE SPREAD OF CONTENTS

The spread of contents from 1985 to the present has not changed very much compared to the earlier period of 1966 to 1985. There were news, speeches, reports of struggles with the pharmacists, the press, number of doctors, and information relevant to practice such as legal and ethical issues. There were also the evergreen columns: Commentary, President’s Column, Council News and Council Statements.

46TH SMA COUNCIL

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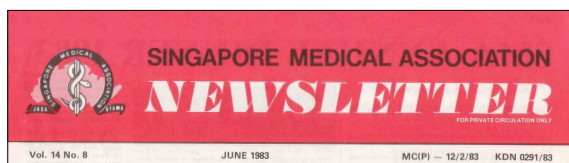
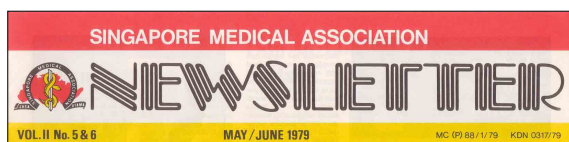
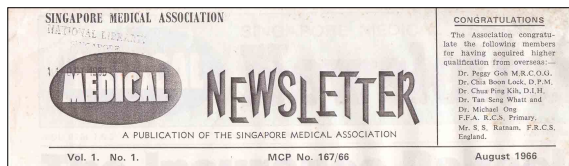
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An idea of the current issues of the day is provided by the headings of the feature articles. Table 1 is a listing of the front page articles of the January issues from 1985 to the present. Table 2 shows the titles of the Editorials from 1985 to 2000, mostly written by me. From 2000 onwards, I noted that the editorial policy was not to have editorials in every issue.

There were a number of years where the January feature was on computer use: 6 out of the 20 feature articles; while Editorials dealt with practice issues: decision-making, free market forces, and pharmacists.

HISTORICAL BITS

The SMA News serves as a chronicle of events and major happenings too. These may be speeches given by key people in and out of the profession. They could also be write-ups on historical bits of things. In the January 1985 issue of the SMA News, I reprinted an article written by one of the first batch of doctors in our medical school,



Mastheads of SMA Newsletters through the years.

Table 1. Front page articles from January issues of 1985 to 2005.

1985 – Future of the King Edward VII College of Medicine Building
1986 – SMA-BBS (SMA Bulletin Board System)
1987 – Are There Too Many Doctors in the World?
1988 – Health for All - 40 Years On
1989 – Information Technology in Medicine
1990 – Health Informatics Saves Lives
1991 – An Overview of CME Strategies
1992 – Medinet: Linking the Health Community
1993 – Medical Informatics in Singapore
1994 – Healthcare Delivery
1995 – Medico-legal Issues in Clinical Practice
1996 – Minister Launches MOH's Home Page
1997 – An Interview with Professor Eugene Braunwald
1998 – New Influenza Strain (H5N1)
1999 – Medical Profession and the Media
2000 – SMC Launched CME Website
2001 – The Medical Profession Acts on WTO
2002 – Doctors as Politicians
2003 – Psychologists and Doctors in the Management of Patients in Healthcare
2004 – 2003 in Retrospect
2005 – Prospective Medicine for Better Health

Table 2. Editorials from 1985 to 2000.

1985 – Nil
1986 – Closer to You
1987 – Dollars and Sense
1988 – Everyday Decision-Making
1989 – Housecalls Again
1990 – Health Informatics
1991 – The Physical Examination
1992 – Clinic Computerisation
1993 – Use the New with the Old Wisely
1994 – Free Market Forces
1995 – Vision: 1995
1996 – A Good Year Ahead
1997 – Towards New Medicine
1998 – Be First Class Pharmacists
1999 – Improving Health
2000 – Growing Old - Can We Cope?



About the author:

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the late Dr Chen Su Lan. This was his contribution to the 60th Anniversary Souvenir Programme of the National University of Singapore. Today, 40 years later, what he wrote is certainly a legacy of his link to us into the past. He wrote: "Of the 16 who entered for the full course, seven were fortunate. Of the seven, two are survivors." It was thus harder to pass the medical course during his time, judging by the casualty rate. Sixty years on, there were only two alive, he and one other colleague. He witnessed the Halley's Comet on 5 May 1910 when he was preparing for his final examinations: "I was fortunate to witness the most soul stirring, the most magnificent and unforgettable heavenly phenomenon, the Halley's comet..."

THE PROFESSION AND THE MEDIA

I would like to complete my account of the SMA News through the years with a peep at the News and the media, as well as my efforts in shaping a better relationship.

I remembered when I first started with the SMA News, the tension between the medical profession and the media was pretty high. There was great unhappiness about quotes from the SMA News by the Press. There was talk of suing the press, but you cannot sue people for talking about what you have printed. I thought there was a need for a better relationship and wisdom.

For a start, my philosophy as the SMA News Editor was to write only things that were reportable without feeling embarrassed. Some topics were better aired in the tea-room and among peers than in the printed media. I also chose to be helpful to the reporters rather than to be at loggerheads with them. I made many friends in the media as the result of my personal policy.

Perhaps this quote taken from the January 1999 issue of the SMA News showed that my philosophy had a positive outcome. "Today, I am happy to report that... there is a lot less tension between medical practitioners and the media." – Mr Leslie Fong, then Editor of the Straits Times/Sunday Times and President of Singapore Press Club. ■