

Interview with Adrian 'Teenage Textbook' Tan,

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By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

Hi Adrian, thank you for agreeing to this SMA News interview at the Raffles Hotel's Long Bar. You were a star debater for the University and NUS Jessup Moots Law Team. I heard that one year, the medical faculty team actually beat you and the law faculty team in the traditional law-medical school debate. I hope that has not coloured your view of the medical profession?

No, it has not coloured my view of doctors. It is true that we were beaten by Paul Ananth Tambyah and the medical school team then, but that was because the judging was impartial. Since then, we have learnt our lesson and invited biased judges who do not like doctors.

What were some of your best memories of studying or practising law?

My best memory in NUS was of Rag & Flag Day, when freshmen from different faculties were busy building floats. A few of us drove around to the different faculties shouting, "Your float stinks!" in a car which had the banner "We are from Medicine Faculty".

Have you ever thought of Medicine as a profession?

No, I don't think of Medicine as a profession.

By that, do you mean that Medicine is more a calling? Just answer, "Yes" or "No"?

No, being a doctor is not a calling. Being a patient is. We are constantly calling for more than 3 minutes of our doctor's time. Why do you think doctors call their customers "patients"? Because you make us wait a really long time.

I have heard some lawyers poking harmless fun about how the law faculty girls are more babelicious than medical faculty girls. Based

on your sharp Teenage Textbook observations, are law faculty girls more attractive than medical faculty girls? Just answer the question, "Yes" or "No"?

Er... I take the Fifth Amendment. Wait – I'm not American, so I can't do that. Okay, I confess, it's a "yes". In fact, even some law faculty guys are more babelicious. By the way, did you marry a doctor, Han Chong?

Eh, brudder, I bet you there are more medical students and doctors in the history of the Miss Universe pageant than law students and lawyers. We just love world peace and saving the world. On to the next serious question. You must admit, one of the prettiest and most happening girls in your year at Hwa Chong Junior College is now a doctor in private practice. Did you ever ask her out on a date? Just answer the question, "Yes" or "No"?

Never. I'm still alive, right?

The world is watching how the litigious environment in the United States is affecting the morale and effectiveness of their doctors. This escalates insurance premiums which will translate to increased healthcare costs. It also threatens to cripple the entire U.S. healthcare system. Ironically, this adversely affects the way healthcare is delivered to the people, the very individuals that the law is supposed to protect. Comments?

I thought I was supposed to answer "yes" or "no"? Anyway, since you asked for a comment, I'll give one. If people make mistakes, and cause hurt, then the victims should be compensated by law. This is true for all members of society – school teachers, bus drivers, even lawyers. Why should doctors be treated differently? There is no doubt that anyone who is sued will have his morale affected, but that cannot be a reason to make him immune from the consequences of causing hurt to his patient. If a

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doctor makes many mistakes and is sued, rightfully, then it is fair that his insurance premiums go up. You won't find many lawyers complaining about their insurance premiums, yet they too get sued for negligence in the same way as doctors do.

You were right in the thick of the recent high profile defamatory lawsuit brought against Singapore Press Holdings as the defendant's legal team assisting Senior Counsel Davinder Singh. Do you think that this overwhelming legal victory for SPH will also undermine the trust of the Singaporean Common Man towards charitable organisations and Volunteer Welfare Organisations?

Oh, I can't really comment on that case.

I understand. Maybe a more general question? After the NKF saga, there was an outpouring of opinions and emotions from the people in the forum pages of the newspapers, media, blogs, internet chatrooms, coffeeshops, hair salons, SMS, even an online petition. Is this a sign that Singaporeans are not as reticent as they are made out to be, and that we are moving towards a more civil society?

The Singapore public has always been very critical and demanding. But until recently, their discussions were always limited to the coffeeshop dialogue or the taxi driver harangue. Technology changed everything. It fanned the flames. The speed at which news spread and discussions blossomed was thanks to SMS phones and the web. People felt free to speak their mind, particularly when their identities were obscured by chatroom nicknames. That's not to say that the points made were not valid. Many people had very valid, and even witty, arguments. On the whole, it's probably healthier for our society to have open, albeit anonymous, debate rather than calm and repressed resentment.

Have you ever donated money to the NKF?

I donated \$20 a month since my National Service days, when I was earning only \$135 a month as a "chow" recruit. So in all, I donated about \$5,000, I think. And that's enough about NKF. Let's talk about something else.

I notice that the wallpaper on your cellphone is a picture of Chairman Mao Zedong in an Astroboy helmet. I understand that you are currently reading The Private Life of Chairman Mao by no less than

his personal physician, Dr Li Zhisui. How is the book so far?

Good research! I recommend the book highly, especially to anyone who has a salacious and non-academic interest in Mao. It tells of his sexual appetites, his petty politicking, his sexual appetites, his lack of hygiene, and his sexual appetites.

Were there any interesting medical vignettes from this book?

Mao suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, which affected his speech. Very few people could understand a word he said. Hence, he once said, "China should abandon communism and embrace capitalism", the people understood it as "China should bid for the 2008 Olympic Games", which was a historic mistake. Okay, I made that last part up. But it's true he had Lou Gehrig's Disease. Mao also never brushed his teeth. Instead, he gargled with tea. As a result, he had a very brown smile.

Surely the story of Chairman Mao is one of how power corrupts absolutely. Do you think his legacy will be that of a great political icon and revolutionary leader who unified China and freed China from imperialism and foreign domination, or one of a self-indulgent, obsessive totalitarian despot-megalomaniac whose judgement and policies like the "Great Leap Forward" and "Cultural Revolution" have led to the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese people and the destruction of millions of Chinese intellectuals and families?



There are two Maos – pre-1949, he was a revolutionary but post-1949, he was a dictator, and perhaps even a reactionary. In the end, the problems he caused China far outweighed the very few good things he did. The number of Chinese Nobel Prize winners, teachers and scientists all dwindled because of his Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, the number of doctors increased – go figure.

Huh? Does that mean Mao liked doctors or did he just feel they were no threat to his hold on power? I know Canadian doctor Norman Bethune was on the Long March with him, and Chairman Mao thought very highly of him.

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Mao loooooooved doctors. Anyway, it is true he had a soft spot for the healing arts. Probably because they cured his various “social diseases” whenever they flared up.

Yes, even idealists who then obtain great power may go to the dark side. Do you think you would be corrupted more by absolute power or Absolut Vodka? I hear you once had a liver biopsy?

I can swear that I have never touched alcohol. With my fingers. I always use a straw.

It is difficult to conceive that the Father of Chinese Communism can arguably have a more bourgeois and indulgent lifestyle than capitalist hedonists like Playboy founder Hugh Hefner. Surely Comrade Mao’s weaknesses for wine, women, song and the finer things in life runs counter to the “Class Struggle” and the “People’s War”, the very foundations of socialism and communism? In fact, Jung Chang’s latest book, Mao, The Untold Story casts further doubt as to the greatness of his leadership and the total lack of transparency within his inner circle.

There is no communist country in the world. Cuba and North Korea are dictatorships, pure and simple. The Soviet Union and China were dictatorships far removed from what Marx and Engels envisioned. It’s ironic that China continues to hold itself out as communist. In fact, the Chinese are one of the world’s great entrepreneurs. To put a Chinese under a communist regime is like putting a smoker in a restaurant. Sooner or later, he will not be able to resist the urge to step outside and yield to his basic instinct. So Mao was just Hugh Hefner with a bigger mansion.

Leaders are only human. The best is yet to be. One hopes that in any society, the rule of law will help to keep safety checks on corporate governance and corporate leadership. There has been a spate of corporate scandals overseas such as the WorldCom and Enron debacles. Of course siphoning away billions of dollars cannot be compared in the same breath as decisions that have led to the deaths of tens and hundred of millions of people. What are your legal and philosophical reflections on these issues?

Wow, I’m not old enough to answer such questions. But if I were, I would say that this is why we have

laws. Laws are good things. Society thinks hard about what the standards are, writes them out and displays them openly for all to see. There can be no hiding. Laws enforce transparency simply because they are clear and apply to everyone. You doctors should know that sunlight is a good disinfectant.

Yes, but too much sunlight can cause sunburn and even skin cancer. The OJ Simpson case really gripped and disillusioned me. It made me feel that those who have money get better legal representation. In Medicine, there are always moves to make healthcare delivery more equitable in spite of difficulties and realities of escalating costs. Comments?

Why shouldn’t people who pay more get better service? What are you, a communist?

Do help me complete the sentence, “Power and Money....”

“... are in the hands of my urologist.” Sad but true. Also my aesthetic surgeon.

Wow, you mean Viagra and Botox are really that expensive?

Very funny. Listen, if this wasn’t a medical magazine, I would definitely botox you in a place which you would not normally expect to receive it.

Thanks for your time, Adrian. What would your last meal on Earth be if you were asked to have one?

I love trying new food. It’s my only vice. Well, not the only one, but perhaps the least expensive and most socially acceptable. Let’s see. If the bistro at the new Supreme Court building were open, I would eat there. I heard the chef on the radio and he sounded like he knew what he was doing. If not, then I would prepare my own meal. If that is not allowed, then I would go for the most unhealthy dinner ever (after all, it’s my last meal right?). I’m a big oyster omelette guy – I love it, except for the oysters, I never have that. Then I’ll have the crab bee hoon from Geylang. It’s that shop featured in Makan Sutra. Excellent. And I’ll have a T-bone steak and lots of French fries from Charlie’s Corner at Changi Point. A cardiologist’s dream come true. It will be my last meal because after eating that, no one will be able to survive. ■