



Physician to the Country

Citation of SMA Honorary Member Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, delivered by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports and Second Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts

When Dr Wong Chiang Yin invited me to deliver a citation of SM Goh Chok Tong, I knew it would be impossible to list all his achievements within the time available.

Many of you know SM Goh as the former Prime Minister. But he means much more to me at a personal level. He is my mentor; the man who recruited me, and the man who taught me the core values of politics. I will never forget his sound advice that if I had to compromise my values, I would lose my value to the Party and to the country. He has always been open, frank, patient and fair with me. He never tried to impose his views on me but always encouraged me to state and defend my position, no matter how unconventional.

Mr Goh has had a long career in politics. He was first elected as a Member of Parliament for Marine Parade Constituency in 1976. He became Singapore's first Minister for Trade and Industry in 1979, and concurrently, Minister for Health in 1981. In 1982, he was appointed Minister for Defence and in 1985, First Deputy Prime Minister. In 1990, Mr Goh succeeded Mr Lee Kuan Yew as Singapore's Prime Minister. After many years as Prime Minister, he became Senior Minister in 2004.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SINGAPORE'S HEALTH SYSTEM

We take for granted that Singaporeans today have access to good and affordable healthcare. This would not have been possible without Mr Goh's leadership and foresight.

Government spending on healthcare more than doubled from \$520 million in 1990 to \$1.2 billion in 2000. With better medical facilities and services, the health of Singaporeans has improved significantly. Our people today are living longer and leading a better quality of life. The number of deaths from diseases such as cancer, heart disease and stroke has fallen. We also have the lowest infant mortality rate in the world.

I remember Mr Goh once said during one of his National Day rallies (2002) that the Government, in a sense, "works like a doctor". The Government, like a good doctor, "applies its own knowledge and experience, consults experts, takes in feedback, and then prescribes what, in its considered opinion, is the best treatment." Indeed, we can say that Mr Goh Chok Tong is one of the best "doctors" in Singapore.

HEALTHCARE PHILOSOPHY

Back in 1990, Mr Goh articulated the government's healthcare philosophy based on five fundamental objectives:

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- i) To nurture a healthy nation by promoting good health;
- ii) To promote personal responsibility for one's health and avoid over-reliance on state welfare or medical insurance;
- iii) To provide good and affordable basic medical services to all Singaporeans;
- iv) To rely on competition and market forces to improve service and raise efficiency; and
- v) To intervene directly in the healthcare sector, when necessary, where the market fails to keep healthcare costs down.

These fundamental objectives remain true today. In pursuit of these objectives, Mr Goh introduced a number of significant initiatives to take Singapore's healthcare system forward.

Health Promotion

Health promotion and primary prevention became the cornerstone of the Government's disease management programmes. It was during the early part of Mr Goh's administration, in 1992, that the National Healthy Lifestyle Programme was launched. In 2001, the Ministry of Health integrated various health education departments and services into the new Health Promotion Board. Today, the board has become the key driver for many of Singapore's national health promotion programmes, building on previous programmes in health education in schools and workplaces.

Healthcare Funding

One of the biggest challenges facing medicine is the thorny issue of healthcare costs. No country in the world has constructed a perfect system which provides universal access, freedom of choice, healthy competition and low costs. One of the key achievements of Mr Goh Chok Tong was the creation of the 3M framework: Medishield, Medisave and Medifund.

It is the key reason why we have a sustainable, fully funded healthcare system in which everyone has access to top-notch healthcare at affordable rates.

Health Administration

A new generation of health administration and public health doctors were also recruited and trained during Mr Goh's term as Prime Minister. As an ophthalmologist who subsequently moved into administration, I can honestly say that my career was a product of the opportunities that he created for both specialist training and medical administration.

The development of control of Chinese Proprietary Medicines, Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners, and Advance Medical Directive, were also important milestones.

Mr Goh saw the need to prepare Singapore for an ageing population. In 2000, the Health Ministry initiated the Framework for Integrated Health Services for the Elderly. This framework aims to streamline and improve the quality of healthcare for the elderly as well as their access to these services.

Health Technologies

Mr Goh Chok Tong also anticipated that the rapid development of healthcare technologies will require better regulation and assessment. For this reason, the Health Ministry integrated several health centres into the new Health Sciences Authority in 2001. This ensured that new technologies are introduced appropriately into our local setting, so that public safety is assured. In this way, we can be certain that our healthcare system remains cost-effective and is of good quality.

RIDING A NATION THROUGH CRISIS

Few of us will forget Mr Goh's pro-active and capable leadership during the nation's health crises, most notably the SARS outbreak in 2003. Mr Goh never saw those difficult times as all gloom and doom. Rather, he saw in them a chance for us to strengthen Singapore's health system and to rally us closer together as one people. Where there were difficult measures to be taken during the crisis, he made it a point to explain the reasons and defused tensions on the ground with dialogue.

I was posted back to SGH during the SARS crisis. I can honestly say that it was perhaps the worst time of my life. We will never forget those dark days, when we lost colleagues and friends; and lived with gnawing fear. I remained in daily contact with him through email. He was a tower of strength and always knew how to speak from his heart to our hearts. I learnt what true leadership in a crisis really was.

CONCLUSION

The medical fraternity owes much to Mr Goh's wisdom and vision. We appreciate SM Goh not only for his policies, but also for the countless lives he has touched and changed in his inimitable way.

Tonight, for Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's distinguished life in public service and for his meritorious service to the local medical profession, the Singapore Medical Association would like to confer upon him its highest honour, an Honorary Membership in the Association. ■