

3 - 9	Speeches at Annual Dinner
14	Letters to Editor
16	President's Forum
20	Interview with Dr Chau Chwen Hwe
27 - 29	Report on Annual Dinner
30 - 34	Examinations
35	Getting to Know Dr Fatimah Lateef

# SMA NEWS



Dr Wong Chiang Yin presents Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong with a Chinese calligraphy piece, as Dr Vivian Balakrishnan who delivered the citation of SM Goh looks on.

## Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong Conferred SMA Honorary Membership

Speech by Senior Minister Goh at the conferment during the SMA Annual Dinner on Saturday, 27 May 2006, Regent Hotel

Distinguished Guests and Friends,

A very good evening to you all. Thank you, Vivian\*, for your warm and kind words. I happened to be in the right place at the right time. Many of the achievements which you attributed to me actually belonged to others – the staff and doctors in the Ministry of Health (MOH), for example. And my ideas could not have been realised without the hard work of the officials who fleshed them out and implemented

them. Take for instance, Medisave. Khaw Boon Wan, guided by Andrew Chew, then Permanent Secretary for Health, crunched the numbers and turned concepts into programmes.

I thank also the Singapore Medical Association (SMA) for conferring the Honorary Membership on me. This is an unexpected honour and in a sense, ironic, for I went against the flow and chose to do Economics instead of Medicine. Many of my close friends, like Tan Cheng Bock, are doctors and members of your Association. I take it that I can now rub shoulders with them in the same august Association.

As Vivian mentioned, I was Minister for Health a long time ago. Singapore's healthcare sector has come a long way since then. As



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Prime Minister, I took an active interest in formulating our national health plans and promoting healthy living amongst Singaporeans because good health, like good education and good housing, is a key requirement for happiness and progress. I pledged that no citizen would be denied healthcare on financial grounds. We have kept that promise. With Medisave, Medishield and other medical insurance schemes, and Medifund, each one of us will have the resources to pay for our medical needs throughout our lives.

Healthcare costs continue to be a major public and political concern. Our population is greying. Moreover, there will be fewer young people to support the economy and the old. Hence, we must manage the healthcare budget wisely so that we can sustain an excellent and affordable healthcare service.

In recent years, new issues have cropped up. Pandemics like SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and avian flu are real and possible threats to our well-being. Our neighbours are competing to be the regional medical hub and closing the gap with us. SingaporeMedicine still has the edge in terms of quality, reliability and technology and this gives us a premium in price. With globalisation and ease of transport, we can and should grow our medical sector to serve foreign patients while looking after our own. The extra income this brings will compensate for what we may lose as lower-end industries and services migrate or are outsourced to other countries. Many Middle East governments pay for overseas healthcare treatment for their citizens. We should leverage on our good reputation in the Middle East to attract more patients here.

Grooming a new generation of medical manpower – not just doctors, but nurses, pharmacists, radiographers and other healthcare professionals – is another challenge. If SingaporeMedicine is to achieve its target of attracting a million foreign patients by 2012, we will need many more healthcare workers. This can be done by expanding the local training pipeline and bringing in skilled foreigners. With a low Total Fertility Rate of only 1.24, we will never produce enough local healthcare personnel to support an excellent healthcare sector.

Over the years, we have been able to provide good healthcare for Singaporeans through a practical and innovative approach. To face the future challenges effectively, we have to adjust and rethink the way we do things. Just because we have done well up to now does not mean that

we will continue to do so. Hence, we must not be afraid to question past practices and review current policies. We must continue to evolve and adapt to meet changing needs, and innovate and try out new ideas. For example, our growing middle class has rising expectations. They have more savings in their Medisave.

How do we construct a better medical insurance scheme to serve their needs more effectively?

The SMA is an organisation whose membership comprises both specialists and general practitioners from the public and private sectors. It represents more than four and a half thousand medical practitioners. Every two in three doctors in Singapore are your members. I wonder why the third one is not. Nevertheless, the SMA has a unique role to play in terms of the development of our healthcare sector and tackling some of the challenges I spoke about.

I am told that the SMA has been working closely with MOH. I commend you for being involved in organising your members and GPs so that their clinics can be used as flu clinics, if an avian flu pandemic should break out. The Centre for Ethics and Professionalism set up by the SMA is another good example of how your Association champions professionalism amongst members for public good. I hope to see the SMA engage in more such activities which serve the community and national good.

Let me conclude. Medicine is first and foremost a caring profession and a noble pursuit. At the heart of the medical profession are service and values. The motto of your Association – “Service Before Self” – sums this up nicely.

Through the years, I have had many opportunities to work with our doctors and healthcare professionals. I have found them passionate and committed to their work, and dedicated to public service. Vivian mentioned Singapore’s experience with SARS in 2003. We could not have defeated SARS if not for the hundreds of doctors and thousands of healthcare workers who stood at the frontline. They risked their lives for us. They left me with a deep impression of their professionalism, courage and noble conduct in the face of mortal danger. Singapore has one of the best medical services in the world. We have much to be proud of. We should work hard to maintain our reputation.

I wish all of you a pleasant and enjoyable evening. Once again, thank you for the honour you have bestowed on me. ■

*\*Please also see:*

*Page 5 – Citation of Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan.*

*Page 7 – Welcome Address by Dr Wong Chiang Yin.*

*Page 27 – Report of SMA Annual Dinner.*

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