

# Voluntarism

K Lyen

The medical profession in Singapore can pride itself for its involvement in the community. Virtually every charitable and voluntary welfare organisation will have doctors freely helping out. Most doctors do this voluntary work quietly and efficiently, and the public are often unaware of the immense contributions made by the medical profession as a whole. The Community Chest of Singapore has a substantial number of doctors volunteering for many of the agencies for the disabled and the elderly. There are 57 doctors who are members of the local Rotary Clubs, which is only one of the many charitable organisations in Singapore. The current President of the National Council of Social Services, and leaders of many of the voluntary welfare organisations are doctors.

In their profession, doctors are often the front line for problems faced by the disadvantaged in society. The disabled are diagnosed and their disability assessed by medical practitioners. The elderly are more prone to illnesses and often seek doctors for help. Faced with these cries for help, it is natural for doctors, whose calling is to alleviate suffering, to respond in a positive way. In the first instance, doctors help by providing their own medical expertise. For example, regular medical check-ups for the disabled at the Rainbow Centre, the Singapore Cheshire Homes, and associations for the intellectually disabled, the hearing and visually impaired, are provided entirely free. Doctors also volunteer for the Singapore Red Cross and the St John Ambulance by providing training or assessment of first aid, and they also help in the collection of blood for the blood bank. A few doctors have even given their voluntary services overseas.

Most of the problems faced by the disabled and the elderly are multifactorial, and require substantial social and educational inputs. This requires a team approach. As a whole, doctors are well placed for this. They are reasonably well-versed in social and educational issues, and by training, they approach problems in a practical non-bureaucratic way. Doctors have a wide spectrum of contacts, ranging from the very pinnacle of society, right down to the very bottom. This can be immensely helpful when it comes to asking for non-medical services. For example, I have had disabled children who required certain types of furniture, not available in Singapore. By explaining the needs

to a carpenter acquaintance, I managed to have the furniture custom-made. In fact, the carpenter donated the furniture entirely free to these children.

Learning to be a volunteer started in secondary school, when I was about 13 years old. Initially it was semi-voluntary. We were encouraged to visit elderly people, and we would do odd jobs for them. I was always very touched by the gratitude shown by these old folks, and they would always ask if I wanted a drink, some rest, something to eat. They were keen to talk to me, but generally, my topic of conversation was limited to my narrow school world. Volunteering continued throughout my university training overseas, where I became involved in some student organisations.

Upon returning back home in the early 80s, I worked in the University Department of Paediatrics, which was located at the Singapore General Hospital. Professor Freda Paul invited me to sit in with her in her "MD" clinic, which I did. Training for the disabled was not so well developed in those days, and many of them vegetated at home. It was quite sad to see so many disabled children and their families facing tremendous difficulties. Trying to solve their problems has always been my driving force as a volunteer.

Dr Victor Seah, a general practitioner and volunteer, had just begun a pilot project for an Early Intervention Programme at MINDS. He asked if I could start a Developmental Assessment Clinic at the Singapore General Hospital, with the aim of screening young disabled children and identifying their problems earlier, so that they could receive therapy sooner. In 1985 I started this multidisciplinary clinic.

In 1985 the Member of Parliament, Dr Vasoo, invited me to sit on the Budget and Allocation Committee at the Community Chest. While on this Committee, several voluntary welfare organisations, including those helping the hearing, the visually, and the physically disabled, all wanted to start their own early intervention programmes. With limited funds in those early days of the Community Chest, I suggested that all these associations should centralise the early intervention programme. In 1986, Dr Ee Peng Liang, the chairman of the Community Chest of Singapore, therefore invited me to chair a committee to look into the setting up of a separate programme for early intervention, and to include the multiply

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disabled, who at that time, were not catered for by any existing voluntary welfare organisation.

In 1992 we started the Rainbow Centre, an umbrella body to look after the Margaret Drive Special School, where I am still the President. In 1995, we started the Balestier Special School.

Dr Yeo Khee Quan, former Chairman of the Singapore Red Cross, invited me to be on the Medical Commission to the Singapore Red Cross, which I chaired from 1994 to 1997. During this time, we launched the Red Cross First Aid Box, revamped the training course, and produced an Official Red Cross First Aid Guide.

When it comes to fund-raising, doctors often serve as an example by being the first to donate. The generosity of doctors is most heartwarming. Through the charitable organisations, doctors are often in the forefront of organising fund-raising

events. Royalties from books written by, and music composed by doctors, are also donated to charity. More volunteers are still required, and I hope that doctors will heed this call.

In conclusion, the medical profession often gets a bad press when a small number of doctors behave in a selfish or anti-social manner. The good that many doctors do in their voluntary work, often goes unnoticed. Doctors make effective volunteers, and over the years, they have made significant contributions to society. I think it would not hurt to let the public know that doctors do have a heart.

Our medical expertise, our ability to network with a wide range of professionals, and our practical approach to problems, help us to be effective volunteers. For me, the best reward for volunteering, one that I shall always treasure, is that beaming smile on a child's face.

## INTRODUCING MEDIC WEEK

A charity week of activities by the medical students of National University of Singapore



**MEDIC WEEK**

17<sup>th</sup> - 24<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 98

*"to be Beacons of Charity and Honour,  
to live lives willing to serve"*

The traditional medic day of the Medical Society has taken on a new shape this year. It is going to be one whole week. The Society has organized four main activities:

◆ **COMMUNITY SERVICE DAY – 17 Jan 1998**

The Medical Students will be taking the elderly from the Moral Welfare Home on an afternoon outing. You are invited to be part of this experience. Contact Miss Lee Sau Yee at 95399612 or Mr Chow Wei'en at 5454639.

◆ **MEDIC CONNECTION – 18 Jan 1998**

This is a fund-raising jog-cycle totalling 70 km. Support our participants generously when they approach you for sponsorship. Contact Mr Vincent Ng at 93119276 to be a sponsor in this fund-raising event.

◆ **BAZAAR & EXHIBITION – 19 - 21 Jan 1998**

This is a jumble sale bazaar cum cancer exhibition. The exhibition is set up by the Singapore Cancer Society. Come and visit the bazaar and exhibition. You may also wish to donate items for the bazaar. Contact Miss Mabel Wong at 7918631 or Mr Ho Weng Hoe at 4812396.

◆ **CHARITY PREMIERE – A Tomb With A View – 23, 24 Jan 1998**

The highlight of the Medic Week is a comedy thriller by Norman Robbins at the Drama Centre. All proceeds will be given to the Singapore Cancer Society and the Children's Cancer Foundation. Take your family for an evening of entertainment and help a good cause. Tickets are priced at \$50 (donation ticket), \$15 and \$12. Contact Mr Dave Lee at 95222709 or leave a message at [med60024@leonis.nus.sg](mailto:med60024@leonis.nus.sg) for ticket orders.

WE NEED YOUR SPONSORSHIP TO HELP US MAKE THIS WEEK A SUCCESS. PLEASE DONATE GENEROUSLY. SEND YOUR DONATION BY CROSSED CHEQUE TO:

The Medical Society, c/o Dean's Office, Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260.