

Life After 40

P Y Cheong

The Singapore Medical Association (SMA) was founded 40 years ago when Singapore was given internal self-government by the British colonial administration. The SMA Constitution states that "All practitioners who are members of the Malaya Branch of the British Medical Association on the 2nd August, 1959 and are resident in Singapore, and all practitioners applying for membership before January 1st 1960 shall be deemed to be founder members⁽¹⁾." The founding fathers envisioned four roles that the association should embrace for the medical profession and society:

- To take the lead on healthcare matters;
- To integrate the contributions from various sectors of the healthcare profession;
- To facilitate information exchanges and interactions within the healthcare profession and with society; and
- To empower the profession to practice with the highest ethical and professional standards.

The acronym "LIFE" by serendipity represents these four roles of leading, integrating, facilitating and empowering. The "LIFE" of the medical profession in Singapore remains pertinent as the profession matures in tandem with the growth of Singapore into a developed nation.

Leading

The objectives in SMA's constitution that spell out the leadership role are:

- (ii) To maintain the honour and interests of the medical profession;
- (iii) To foster and preserve the unity and aim of purpose of the medical profession as a whole; and
- (iv) To voice its opinion, and to acquaint the Government and other bodies with the policy and attitude of the profession.

Article II Objects and Powers SMA Constitution

The first annual report of SMA in 1961 (Fig 1) recorded that the professional societies existing at that time had agreed that for matters affecting the medical profession as a whole, they would not take action without consulting SMA⁽²⁾. This leadership role SMA assumes in representing the profession remains as important today. The SMA has led the profession through important milestones of our nation. It helped to form the volunteer Medical Corp of the fledgling People Defence Force in 1970. On every important

issue affecting the health of our people, SMA represented the profession by giving views in Government committees, submitting memoranda on legislation affecting healthcare and educating the public through the media and directly through seminars.

At times, certain groups within the medical profession wanted their interests to be better represented. The Association of Private Medical Practitioners of Singapore (APMPS) was one such group set up in 1981 to represent doctors in the growing private sector. The founders of APMPS had the foresight to insist that APMPS members must also be concurrently SMA members. When it was important for a single unified voice to speak for the profession, the APMPS in 1994 chose to subsume under and reinforce SMA by going into voluntary liquidation. This lesson from history should be remembered. It is important to preserve unity of purpose of the profession as a whole.

Integrating

Three objectives in the Constitution refer to the role of integration viz.

- (i) To promote the medical and allied sciences in Singapore;
- (v) To arrange and hold periodical meetings of the members of the Association for scientific and social purposes; and
- (viii) To enlighten and direct public opinion on problems of health in Singapore.

Article II Objects and Powers SMA Constitution

The sectors within the medical profession are now more diversified. Professional societies based on sub-specialties, treatment modalities, disease entities, and other affiliations are increasingly formed. These societies have contributed much to the vibrancy and strength of our healthcare system. SMA however has the responsibility of integrating and balancing these activities to better serve the health needs of our people.

SMA needs to integrate the roles of allied healthcare professionals in the practice of medicine in Singapore, namely the pharmacists, the nurses and also other emerging groups like healthcare assistants. The consensus paper on 'The Medical Profession and the Pharmaceutical Industry' recently co-published with the Singapore Association of Pharmaceutical Industries is a good example of the integrative role SMA plays. The place of alternative medicine such as

Singapore Medical Association
2 College Road
Level 2
Alumni Medical Centre
Singapore 169850

P Y Cheong, FAMS, FCFPS,
FRCPE, FACP
President, 37th - 39th Council

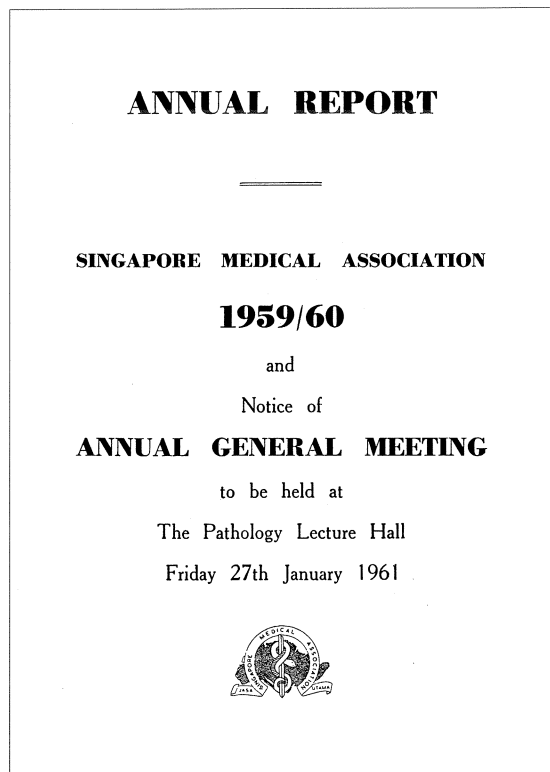


Fig 1 – SMA's first Annual Report.

traditional Chinese medicine must also be better defined in the healthcare system.

The SMA must reach out to involve the community. For example, the SMA hopes to collaborate with the Consumer Association of Singapore and the Press Club to arrive at consensus positions governing information flow between the medical profession and the public this year. The National Medical Convention organised yearly since 1969 serves to educate the public on important healthcare issues.

Facilitating

The objectives that define the facilitating role of the Association are:

- (vi) To promote social, cultural and professional activities among members of the Association; and
- (ix) To publish papers, journals and other materials in furtherance of the above objects.

Article II Objects and Powers SMA Constitution

The role of facilitating interactions and information flow becomes even more important as there are now more than 5000 doctors in Singapore. The membership of SMA has also grown from 433 in 1959 to 3425 presently.

The monthly Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ) circulated to members and periodically to doctors who are non-members facilitate 'social, cultural and professional activities amongst doctors in Singapore' as envisioned in the constitution. The information flow beyond Singapore is achieved by the SMA Online on the World-wide Net as well as a thousand copies of the printed SMJ circulated overseas every month.

Empowering

The empowering role of the Association is defined as follows:

- (vi) To support a high standard of medical ethics and conduct

Article II Objects and Powers SMA Constitution

The ethical position taken by the SMA in recent years is woven into the moral fabric that the medical profession needs to preserve. One good example is SMA's stand that profit guarantees given by doctors to commercial concerns are unethical. Initiatives such as the 1998 SMA Ethics Conference empower doctors to deal with conflicts in medical ethics and practice. The setting up of the SMA Centre for Ethics and Professionalism would spearhead this movement.

Forty years on, SMA should further restructure itself for its role as the 'LIFE' of the profession. It should examine the ways in which its leaders are elected. It should rethink whether the present system of electing its leaders through direct voting in person at its annual general meetings is still appropriate for an association with 3500 members. It should continue to evolve a system that is responsive to the concerns of every sector of the profession.

SMA should also look into how to better serve its members and society. Administering an organisation like SMA requires the involvement of more than committed volunteer doctors who are willing to give their time. It needs more full-time executives and professional staff. The proposal of the 39th Council to incorporate a wholly owned company to take over certain functions such as publications should be carefully considered. Many national medical associations such as the British and Australian Medical Associations have moved in this direction of allowing greater management autonomy and imposing market discipline on aspects of their services to members.

The SMA Centre for Ethics and Professionalism should be developed as the think tank and education centre for the whole healthcare profession. This is in addition to the important role the SMA Ethics Committee has played over the years in handling complaints against doctors. The bugbear of medical indemnity and medico-legal litigation must also be constantly addressed.

As we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of SMA, we need to ensure that it continues to lead, integrate, facilitate and empower doctors in their mission to serve the healthcare needs of our people. 'Jasa Utama', or 'Service before Self' as SMA's motto proclaims – there is 'LIFE' after 40.

REFERENCES

1. Constitution of The Singapore Medical Association 1990:3.
2. Singapore Medical Association Annual Report 1959/60:6.