

## EDITORIAL

# THE CHANGING IMAGE OF DOCTORS

If one were to ask the laymen which professionals command the most respect, they usually put doctors among the top three — often above lawyers and politicians. Asked for adjectives to describe doctors, they will choose words like honest, reliable and trustworthy. That is why doctors are allowed to enter people's homes and carry out intimate examinations on their patients. Similarly letters from doctors are much valued, be it a letter to the HDB for a special favour or a letter to the immigration department to extend the stay of a foreigner.

Hence we as a profession should be concerned when the image of doctors seems to be sinking. Part of this may be spurious — this phenomenon may be part and parcel of a more educated, critical and demanding society. Nevertheless the fact is real and this may be attributed both to individuals and to the whole profession. Pick up any newspaper and we see more doctors than usual being accused of murder, theft and fraud. The good old days when "every physician should be caring, compassionate and dedicated to his patients, to keep them well and to help them when they are ill. Each physician should be committed to work, to learning, to rationality, to science and to serving the greater society" appears to be gone forever. In its place we have a highly trained, competitive and often combative medical scientist ever conscious of his place in the medical hierarchy, trying to outperform the person next to him. The story is told of two doctors in the U.S. who decided to go fishing in a wooded area over the week-end. When they were having a very good time, a big bear came out of the forest. One doctor looked over, put down his fishing rod, took off his boots and changed to a pair of track shoes. His other friend said to him "you aren't going to be able to outrun that bear". The first doctor replied "I don't have to outrun that bear — all I have to do is to outrun you!"

But do all these add to a sinking image. Sadly they do because image as any advertising firm will tell you, may not have much to do with reality. Lazy, dishonest and uncaring doctors, like any black sheep in any profession, have always existed but because of public interest, the mass media tends to sensationalize such tales. Indeed, if the medical profession's image becomes any more tarnished then people might cease to notice the hard work and dedication of most doctors. This has already happened in some countries like the United States. It is important for us to remember that image is important although the more pragmatic among us may view this as simplistic. To these people we may recall the words of Mark Twain who said "Once you have a reputation for being an early riser, you can sleep into noon every day."

On the other hand some of the changes in the medical image are welcome. The growing realization that doctors are fallible and do not know everything is a positive trend. This would encourage patients to take more responsibility for their own health. Doctors themselves are slowly accepting the importance of audit and objective appraisal for their performance. Most doctors are committed to the concept of continuing education. The constant erosion of the public belief that doctors are honest and trustworthy could damage the profession. Patients need to believe their doctor for example when he says a disease is incurable — otherwise they will become prey to all sorts of charlatans. When a doctor prescribes a drug, the patient needs to be convinced it is the best choice and not because it is the best promoted or because the doctor is getting a bonus from the drug firm. The central issue is that the doctor and the profession must be above suspicion in its dealing with the public. This integrity is pivotal in the doctor-patient relationship and must be taught and emphasised in all medical schools. Thomas Paine once said "when planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary." Once we lose our reputation for integrity all is lost, for like Humpty, Dumpty, one fall will be enough. Both the profession and society have a stake in this for in the final analysis where does a person turn to when he or she falls ill — to a doctor of course!

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