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 President

The First 20 Days

The 56th MMA AGM is historic for being held in Miri for the first time. I would like to say a big thank you to the Organising Committee and the Miri medical community for hosting. It shows that through the MMA spirit many other cities in Malaysia can come together to host our AGM. Our members came from all over the country and many friendships have been built up over many AGMs. It is the spirit of working together, helping each other to achieve our common goal. There were some short comings, but we have gained much from the experience.

The amendments to try to get the voluminous amount of paperwork into cyber space generated some useful discussions. On one hand we do not want to change our constitution unless it is absolutely necessary. Some members said that the Council should conduct the business of MMA in the best interest of our Association without changing the Constitution. The others are for constitutional amendments to avoid future ROS interference. In view of this our HGS has asked the ROS for guidelines and for now, hard copies must be sent out for notices of meeting both at the national and branches level, but the minutes could be sent out as softcopy. The other resolutions for starting "koperasi", of having CEO of MMA, setting up a finance and insurance committee, and getting legal advice of LHDN for Sdn Bhd were passed successfully.

There were many memorable moments at the AGM some of which is worthy of repeating. Notable mentions include the contributions by Datuk Pattinggi Tan Sri Dr George Chan and his wife Datuk Lorna, Datuk Lau Siew Wai and Tan Sri Ling Chiong Ho. The informal night, an important part of any AGM was equally spectacular with the special contribution of Dr Safrina and her team.

MMA consists of the Executive Committee, Council of all the State Chairmen and representatives, Section concerning House Officers, Medical Officers and Specialists and Private Practitioners Section. Many others contribute through the Berita MMA, Medical Journal of Malaysia, Ethical Committee, plus many other committees and societies. All of these make up MMA. It is incumbent of me to acknowledge these unsung heroes of MMA who work quietly and are often unrecognised. I would like to thank them all and hope they will continue to serve MMA. I would like to especially thank our Immediate Past President Dr Ashok for his guidance during the last one year.

One of the main concerns from the 56th AGM was our financial status. 2015-2016 showed a decrease of income and increase of expenditure. This was further complicated as the forensic accounting report is not ready and by an ongoing legal proceeding. I have given it top priority this year to get the financial system in order.

The Deputy Minister of Health Datuk Seri Dr Hilmi, in reply to my speech on the disparities of health in Malaysia, said that I spoke like a politician. Medicine and politics often intercept and more so when we talk about the social determinants of health. The social strata determines what disease burden you are likely to get. MMA must collaborate with the various government agencies so nobody will be left behind. We will need all sectors to talk about health.

One of the main job of the President is to deal with the press. The wide ranging issues, sensitivities and the deadlines post some challenges to me. The messages and emails from journalists asking for comments started coming in straight after the AGM. So far the reporters have been very courteous.

The first question was on the Sale of Alcohol to people aged 21 years and below.

This will become illegal from 1st December 2017. Of course my reply was that MMA welcomes such a move by the Ministry of Health with the implementation of the Food (Amendment) Regulations 2016. This rule also includes the display of signage at point of sale and labelling requirements for alcohol products, and failure to comply will attract a jail sentence of not more than two years or a fine not exceeding RM10,000. The real impact of this new ruling is to stop young people drinking, given that the adolescent brain is particularly prone to addiction. Do we as a nation have a problem with drink driving, violence and other social ills associated with drinking? Responsible drinking after all is a great way to relax and enjoy the company of friends and family. However for slow metaboliser of acetaldehyde, alcohol is known to cause cancer.

The second question was about MMC allowing a graduate doctor from a foreign medical school to work despite not having the minimal grades to enter a local medical school. As I did not have the details of MMC decision my answer was in very general terms. If the returning doctor went to a non-recognised foreign medical school then

he or she had to sit for a Malaysian Medical Qualifying Exams conducted by the MQA. After which the 2 years Housemanship would be vigorous enough to produce safe doctors. However if anyone torts the system as alleged, MMC is robust enough to protect the public. Should I tell the reporter about the dysfunctional and disjointed state of the medical education? This insatiable desire of parents wanting their children to do medicine has produced a glut of doctors, putting pressure on the Government hospital system who is entrusted to train them to be safe and competent. We have too many too soon and somebody must turn off the supply. Creating more specialist training posts is good if we can afford to pay them. The grumbling among the existing rank and file is growing louder and louder due to slow promotion and little pay increment.

Then the disturbing National Health and Morbidity Survey 2015 was released by YB Datuk Seri Dr S Subramaniam.

1. 17.5 % (3.5million) of adults 18 and above have diabetes. 8.3% are known diabetes but 9.2% have undiagnosed diabetes.
2. 30.3% (6.1million) of adults 18 and above have hypertension. 13.3% known and 17.2% undiagnosed as hypertensive.
3. Adults 18 and above 33.4 % (6.3 million) are pre obese and 30.6% (5.7million) are obese. 12 million of Malaysians are unhealthy by the weight criteria?
4. 11% of children 18 and below are obese.
5. 22.8% (5million) adult currently smoked.
6. 29.2% (4.2 million) of adults 16 years and over are suspected to have mental health problems.

3.5 million Malaysia have diabetes and after 10 years into the natural history of the disease, the complications will be surfacing. Surely we are sitting on a time bomb and as a profession looking after them we must be prepared for the retinopathy, renal failures, coronary heart disease, stroke, ischaemic legs and poorly healing ulcers. The burden of disease is enormous. 16% more in daily expenditure to treat diabetes and as for dialysis patients, we may need RM4000 per month per patient just to stay alive.

With so many undiagnosed diabetes and hypertensives, and 50-80% of our population prefers government healthcare facilities, reason being the high cost of private care, we must start investing more in public facilities. The time is now before the tsunami of complications of diabetes and hypertension start.

The national weight problem (64% of population being overweight) needs to be tackled from all fronts. We have to re-examine our infant feeding, school canteen food policy, our national public transport, national sport policy among many other areas. We welcome the Ministry of Health proposal to introduce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages in the effort to reduce the rate of diabetes in the country.

Smoking is still a major problem even though we know of the harmful effects of cigarettes ever since 1954. 22% smoking prevalence has not changed much in the last decade. The 10% increase of smokeless cigarettes in one year is a worrying trend as this is a lifelong habit. Smoking cessation therapy is not particularly successful. We have to tell ourselves that our next generation is going to be smoke free. We have to stop the promotion and advertisement of cigarettes and ban public smoking. Plain packaging with warning labels must be enforced. The government should set a date to ban all sale of cigarettes in one generation. One generation from now is 2040. We need one generation so that no new smokers will even start this habit. We should emulate the British Medical Association's policy of standard packaging, ban of smoking in private vehicle carrying children, working towards a tobacco free society by 2035. Britain has limited the sale of tobacco to people born after the year 2000 and a mandatory requirement for tobacco companies to report on their sales data, marketing strategies and lobbying activity plus an annual levy to provide funding for future tobacco control and smoking cessation services.

Recently, the sudden death in a dental clinic also generated many queries from the press. As the case was still being investigated I asked the press to be respectful of the family and not to speculate until the full investigation was done.

The other main issue during this first 20 days of this Presidency is the renewal of the FOMEMA Concession purportedly to be signed on the 15th June 2016. The PPS has been working hard to get a better deal for the General Practitioners after 18 years. Now the signing is postponed for 6 months to allow more consultations, we have to work harder to make our views more widely known.

The debate on the pharmaceutical services in the country is still very active, pending the tabling of the Pharmacy Bill this October. The press has been asking about the wastage from unused medications and how to safely dispose of them. There was another question regarding the problem of counterfeit drugs in the country. Indirectly they are asking for a greater role by pharmacists in our country.

On the outbreak of HFMD, Health Director-General Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah reported an upward trend since April, hitting 1,379 cases in the last week (The Star 17th June 2016).

As you can see the job of the President is never so easy. We have our own particular limitation of knowledge, time and expertise. I draw heavily on our colleagues in the Executive Committee. I admire Past Presidents for their ability to rise up to the occasion. The appointment of a CEO was agreed in the AGM and he or she will surely help in the running the MMA.

As this is the Holy month of Ramadhan, I wish all our Muslim members Selamat Berpuasa and a Happy Hari Raya Aidil Fitri.