

SPEECH BY DR TONY TAN KENG YAM, CHAIRMAN OF NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION, AT THE 17TH SGH ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC MEETING AND EVIDENCE-BASED MEDICINE SEMINAR 2008 HELD ON FRIDAY, 25 APRIL 2008 AT 9.00 AM AT THE AUDITORIUM OF THE COLLEGE OF MEDICINE BUILDING

“Team-based Healthcare in an Academic Environment”

Mr Bernard Chen
Chairman, SingHealth

Professor Tan Ser Kiat
Chief Executive Officer
Singapore General Hospital

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be with all of you this morning to deliver the Opening Address at the 17th SGH Annual Scientific Meeting.

SGH has come a long way since it was established 187 years ago.

In addition to providing excellent healthcare throughout its long history, SGH has contributed greatly to medical education in Singapore.

Its alumni include many of Singapore’s prominent doctors, and just to name a couple – the late Prof. Chao Tzee Cheng – a well-known forensic pathologist, and Dr. Kwa Soon Bee – currently emeritus consultant in the Department of Haematology, who was also the longest-serving Permanent Secretary of Health and Director of Medical Services from 1984-1996.

SGH is also an innovator in clinical treatments and surgical techniques.

In 2002 for example, specialists from SGH and the National Dental Centre jointly developed a new jaw advancement surgery, which was hailed as a breakthrough treatment in Obstructive Sleep Apnoea.

Indeed, SGH can be proud of all its outstanding achievements, and deserves its reputation as the flagship hospital for Singapore and the region.

At this point, I would like to congratulate everyone who has contributed to SGH's current success.

But as we all know, history is no guarantee for the future.

Like all other hospitals, SGH will need to continue to adapt and adjust to the changing environment, improving to maintain its standing and provide better quality care to its patients.

Moving Towards Team-based Healthcare in an Academic Environment

It is timely for SGH to leverage on your growing strengths in clinical research and education, and build upon your solid foundation of clinical service.

For a long time, it had been difficult to get the pieces of the jigsaw together as we were focused on containing rising healthcare costs and improving service efficiency.

As a result, there was very little spare capacity at our hospitals, and doctors who were interested in research had little time and funds to pursue research actively.

A similar situation also arose in education, where service loads hindered doctors from being engaged more fully in teaching, except for the most passionate.

Nonetheless, the policy of containing costs and improving efficiency was the right one to take.

Today, Singapore provides first-world healthcare at affordable prices, and we are internationally respected for our efficient delivery of healthcare, which is strong evidence to support our approach.

But now, there is increased funding for clinical research (through the recent additional grants from the National Research Foundation), as well as more manpower to help backfill for clinicians who want to be engaged in research and education.

With the flagship SGH, established national specialty centres and the new Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School (GMS) in close proximity, the pieces are in place for Outram to be a world-class academic healthcare system that integrates clinical services, teaching and research in a holistic patient-centric manner.

And SGH has the opportunity to lead in this effort, by creating better synergies between the three areas of clinical services, teaching and research and developing the campus to its fullest potential, moving towards team-based healthcare in an academic environment.

Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School

With the vision of a vibrant clinical research culture in mind, I am happy that Duke Medical School is co-operating with NUS in the Duke-NUS Graduate Medicate School (GMS).

During my visit to Duke in 2002, I was very impressed by their innovative, research-intensive medical curriculum which could help Singapore to train a strong manpower base of clinician scientists to further our biomedical sciences initiative.

I felt that Duke's presence in Singapore would bring diversity to our medical education landscape, and enhance our position as a regional medical hub.

There are clear signs of support from our new partner in supporting the initiative to develop an academic healthcare system.

Hoarding around the Duke-NUS GMS construction site display signs saying "The Return of the Medical School to Outram Campus".

Clearly, this is an indication that Duke-NUS GMS is considered to be an integral part of Outram and a partner of SGH, with the desire to "re-ignite the pioneer spirit" here.

Duke's agreement to offer a joint M.D. degree, with NUS, to graduates of the Duke-NUS GMS programme is a strong statement of their ownership and confidence in this endeavour.

I am pleased that since its inaugural intake of students in Aug 2007, Duke-NUS GMS has shown strong progress in many milestone areas.

To cite a few examples, the recruitment of core faculty from Duke University to Duke-NUS GMS has been completed 3 years ahead of schedule.

Its 5 Signature Research Programmes are also progressing well, with 2 prominent scientists, David Virshup and Duane Gubler, already being appointed as programme directors.

In terms of the student intake profile, Duke-NUS GMS has also succeeded in attracting an international pool of talented students with diverse backgrounds for their pioneer cohort.

Despite the intensive and rigorous programme, these 26 students have done well, and 3 of them have made the Honor Roll.

I am encouraged by the developments at Duke-NUS GMS, and I believe the School will continue to excel in the future.

However, there will be changes to the established system and SGH should be prepared to be open to the new possibilities and manage them carefully.

For instance, the pioneer cohort at Duke-NUS GMS is known to have posed challenging questions to their professors even as first-year students.

As they begin their clinical rotations in SGH later this year, they will provide a fresh stimulus to the current system of medical education in our hospitals.

I am glad to see many SGH clinicians taking up concurrent faculty appointments at Duke-NUS GMS.

Among them is Prof. Soo Khee Chee, who has won the Outstanding Clinician Mentor Award at the recent National Medical Excellence Awards Ceremony.

I would like to commend the SGH clinicians for contributing their experience to train the next generation of doctors, and continuing the strong tradition of medical education at Outram.

Moving Forward in Clinical Research

In the near future, I hope to see a similar enrichment in the way research is conducted at Outram.

SGH and Duke-NUS GMS each have their own strengths, and both parties should look into how they can best complement each other in their research achievements.

I understand that steps have already been taken in this direction.

For the Cancer and Stem Cell Biology Programme at Duke-NUS GMS, several members of the research team also hold joint appointments at the National Cancer Centre and SGH.

This is an encouraging development, and I hope SGH and Duke-NUS GMS will work even more closely in the future.

More emphasis on research will mean some difficult changes for SGH as it copes with integrating clinical research with the heavy clinical service load.

SGH will have to explore how it can encourage more clinicians to pursue clinical research without compromising the efficiency of clinical services delivery.

Many implications such as employment and deployment issues, budgeting and governance changes will need to be worked through.

Different stakeholders will need to be pulled together, with greater alignments between missions and values.

There are no easy solutions to these issues.

Nevertheless, with a strong leadership team in place, I am confident that progress will be made.

I am glad to note that Professor Ang Chong Lye has been appointed as the new CEO for SGH.

Under his direction, the Singapore National Eye Centre has attained the reputation as a premier eye centre in Asia.

With his excellent track record, I am sure that Dr Ang will bring SGH to new heights.

With the exciting prospects, however, we must always keep in mind that the aim is to develop effective clinical applications that address important public health issues in Singapore.

The fundamental objective of keeping healthcare affordable will always be relevant, and ultimately, this is also the role of SGH as “the people’s hospital”.

Conclusion

The 17th Annual Scientific Meeting presents a good platform to talk about such organizational issues.

It is always useful for different departments to share knowledge and learn from each other, and this is particularly true for a large organization like SGH.

Ideally, such scientific meetings should take place across all hospitals in the public sector, and perhaps with the private sector too.

This is an idea that might be explored further in the future.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare the 17th Annual Scientific Meeting open.

I wish everyone a stimulating and memorable discussion.

Thank you.
