

Editorial

The Annals and the Medical Narrative of Singapore

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The start of the new decade has brought nothing short of chaos to health services from around the world. At hand, there is the global pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that was first reported in Wuhan City in Hubei Province in Mainland China before it spread to Singapore and rest of the world.^{1,2}

Initially, stringent containment measures and border controls in Singapore had curtailed the spread of COVID-19 to the local community. However, the country soon saw a second wave of COVID-19 infection after a spike in the number of confirmed cases was reported among returning residents—citizens and permanent residents—and visitors from the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom, Italy and other parts of Europe.^{1,2} While there is still an atmosphere of relative calm in Singapore, the situation elsewhere has, unfortunately, been quite dire. Several major hospitals in the USA and Italy have declared that they had run out of mechanical ventilators and personal protective equipment after frontline health workers and hospitals were overwhelmed by the large numbers of symptomatic patients who were seeking treatment. Consequently, doctors were forced to make heartbreaking decisions to triage patients who arrived at hospitals into those who qualify for ventilatory support and those who do not by resorting to the use of crude age cut-offs because of lack of knowledge of the pathophysiology of COVID-19 and reliable biomarkers that can guide clinical management, as well as from growing scarcity of medical resources (both human and material).¹ The age cut-offs also seem to be getting lower as the crisis deepens.

In most countries, the psychological impact of COVID-19 is palpable as scenes of panic buying and paranoia filled the headlines in the news media, public spaces within hospitals are emptied out and once-busy streets and malls turned lifeless.³ Singapore is not

unaccustomed to the threat of epidemics. Important infectious disease episodes and events have been carefully chronicled through various articles published in the Annals of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore (the Annals), from the country's experience with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak⁴ caused by the SARS coronavirus in 2003 and numerous outbreaks of infectious disease that struck us throughout our recorded existence as a nation.⁴⁻⁷

The Communicable Disease Centre (CDC), formerly Middleton Hospital, was founded in 1913 to manage infectious diseases in Singapore before it was succeeded by the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID)⁷ in 2019. In January 1979, the Annals reported on the threat of tuberculosis and malaria in Singapore.^{4,5} This was followed by initial reports on the first molecular tool that was developed in Singapore to diagnose hepatitis B infection.⁷ Indeed, progress in the delivery of health services in Singapore may be gleaned from the rich repository of articles published in the Annals that covered contemporaneous issues faced by Singapore including drug efficacy and safety,⁸ drug abuse,⁹ suicide,^{10,11} diabetes mellitus,¹² hypertension¹³ and many others.¹⁴ At a time when teaching materials were limited and management updates were not easily accessed by most medical practitioners, senior physicians and academics often engaged the print platform provided by the Annals to update the local medical community on the latest information to inform the practice of medicine and surgery. With a repository of >6000 articles spanning >4 decades, the Annals has provided Singapore with an important account of issues that confronted us in the past.

More than ever, there is a need to continue this narrative as our health system is now being challenged on multiple fronts: ageing population, high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (such as diabetes mellitus, stroke, ischaemic heart disease and cancer) and rising costs of health services. As Singapore continues to earn

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international accolades for her delivery of affordable and consistent health services, there is a need for her medical community to continue to add to the evolving narrative on the transformation of health services through scholarly contributions.

The medical and research communities should take advantage of the rich disease phenotypes found in multiethnic Singapore and in the region that are ripe for detailed investigation. Some of these phenotypes include high prevalence of diabetes mellitus, younger age onset of stroke and other cardiovascular diseases, and ethnic differences in disease prevalence and outcomes.¹² The latter observations—considered “localised” issues—have not received much attention in international journals that understandably choose to focus on pressing issues pertinent to the geographic location of authors and journal publishers. The neglect of the importance of characterising our population well could lead to an over-reliance on overseas data to guide local health policies, treatment guidelines and foci of biomedical research.

The Annals needs your support to continue to evolve our health narrative. There is a rich source of data and materials that could have immediate health implications in Singapore and beyond. As the main publication of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, the Annals was founded on the premise of promoting medical education and research excellence. The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown us clearly how quickly news travels, from a need to describe the clinical and genetic entity of the virus to the global scramble to develop a point-of-care diagnostic assay, new treatments, new vaccines and, crucially, the need for a medical journal that provides strong, independent peer review to validate pertinent new information. The Annals addresses these needs and aims to publish and disseminate the findings of research within a short handling time. As an indexed journal, the articles published in the Annals are accessible from most popular medical search engines (such as PubMed, Ovid and Web of Science) and from our very own website (www.annals.edu.sg). Our move to an online platform has meant that all accepted submissions to the Annals have international viewership and are freely downloadable. The Annals invites you to leverage on our platform to

publicise your best science and research, and to help shape our medical narrative in Singapore and beyond.

On a personal note, to health workers (doctors, nurses, clinic staff, administrators, cleaners, porters, security officers, scientists, emergency/public services and academic publishing staff) and other unsung heroes, a sincere thank-you for your tireless work and enormous sacrifices fronting our response against COVID-19. Please keep well and stay safe!

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