

Speech by Dr Tan Ser Kiat at the 2003 Annual Induction Ceremony of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore

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Our Guest of Honour, Your Excellency, President Nathan, President of the Republic of Singapore and Patron of the Academy, & Mrs Nathan; Acting Minister for Health, Mr Khaw Boon Wan; Permanent Secretary (Health), Mr Moses Lee; DMS, Dr Tan Chorh Chuan; Master, Academy of Medicine, Singapore, Dr Satku; Past Masters; fellow Academicians; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen:

I would like to thank your Master, Dr Satku, for inviting me to address this distinguished gathering here this evening on the occasion of the conferment of Honorary Fellowship of the Academy on our Patron and the induction of new fellows into this learned institution.

The Academy has been in existence for well over four decades and has a most illustrious history since its founding in 1957. As we reflect on our past achievements, it is important that we look ahead at the challenges that face the profession.

The quantum leaps made in the life sciences, biomedical engineering and nanotechnology in the last few decades have put Medicine on the threshold of exciting breakthroughs in life expectancy and quality lifestyle never seen before in the history of mankind.

The completion of the sequencing of the Human Genome in June 2000 has opened up immense opportunities through downstream developments in proteomics, pharmaco-genomics, gene therapy and genetic engineering. Discoveries in cell and molecular biology and stem cell technology have opened up whole new fields of possibilities in treating the untreatable and curing the incurable.

Even as we enter the 21st century on the back of such exciting developments, the profession faces major moral and ethical issues. These dilemmas and controversies are further coloured by personal, emotional and religious considerations and one may never fully come to any consensus on any of these issues.

This evening, however, I thought I would like to share with you very briefly some of my concerns affecting our profession. I hope that this will not sound as pontification on my part but serve as an early warning signal.

The Medical profession has historically been regarded as an honourable and highly respected profession, one that is totally dedicated to the service of the sick and the infirmed. As a young medical student I've been greatly inspired and impressed by great teachers like the late Gordon Arthur Ransome, Professor Donald Gunn, Professor Wong Hock Boon and

Professor Seah Cheng Siang. Professor Ransome, as many of you know, is the founder Master of this distinguished Academy.

As a young doctor and surgeon, I had the privilege of learning and working under several distinguished academicians, like the late Professors Seah Cheng Siang and N Balachandran. They are truly great teachers as well as mentors, friends and confidants, persons of the highest integrity and wisdom, and to whom I can look up and seek their wisdom and counsel when faced with difficult problems, professional or otherwise.

They were the true leaders of the profession. Their expressed opinions and stand on issues were highly regarded and helped shape the profession. It was truly a generation of great leadership. Physical exhaustion and fatigue were never in our vocabulary when working with these teachers, in spite of the tremendous demands put on us.

I'm somewhat disturbed by recent trends of development within the profession. Some are more concerned with personal and professional fame and glory and instant gratification. Yet others have committed acts that bring great disrepute to our profession.

Many, especially those who are just starting their careers, do not consider treating patients a privilege but just another job that is no different from other trades. Hard work and commitment are no longer regarded as virtues by some.

Today, we do need leadership that will help to steer our profession back to its rightful role in society. We need the Seah Cheng Siangs, Balachandrans and Chao Tzee Chengs of yesteryear to help restore our reputation and standing with the public. Our leaders must stand tall and be men and women of the highest professional and personal integrity and honesty, trusted and respected by the profession and public alike.

Similarly, we need all members of the profession to come forward and support your organisations. It is only through strong and highly respected institutions like the Academy, led by men and women of the highest integrity, that we can hope to gain the trust and respect of the public, society and government.

I plead with and urge all of you here this evening, particularly the new academicians, to not only remain within the fold of the Academy, but be engaged in its activities. Build up the name and reputation of the Academy in the same standing as the Royal Colleges of the UK and the Colleges and Academies of various disciplines and specialties in North America.

¹ Group Chief Executive Officer
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Influence your fellow colleagues who are not already fellows to enter into the fold of the Academy; for the more representative our Academy is, the stronger it will be. Only then can we take pride in a truly great institution.

For those of you who feel you have the time and leadership capabilities, come into the Council and serve. Deny those who are less than upright and capable as they will bring disrepute to our profession. Together, let us build a great Academy no less than the hallowed Royal Colleges of the UK.

Finally, may I leave you with these words of Sir William Osler, Professor of Medicine at the School of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore in the early 20th century:

“The practice of Medicine is an art, not a trade, a calling, not a business, a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.”