

Speech to the College of Orthopedic Surgeons

5 December 2003

Professor KS Leung, Prof. Qiu, Prof. Learmonth, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, let me begin by congratulating the fellows and members of your college in achieving a major milestone in their career and indeed in their life today.

In the last 12 months, Hong Kong has gone through a period of, what I called, Dark Ages. We have braced the financial crisis and suffered from economic downturn. SARS struck, bringing Hong Kong to an almost standstill. The government has faced major difficulties in launching and implementing its policy. The public is bitter and emotions are high.

Under this economic and political climate, all sectors suffer and the health care profession is no exemption. Hospital jobs are being slashed. Contracts will be terminated at a fixed period of time. Private sector is struggling. A lot has been said about private-public interface, but little has been materialized. Morale is low and grievance is flooding. Do we see any light at the end of the tunnel?

In my view, the SARS calamity actually has a silver lining. Never before had the health care profession been embraced by the public with such high regards and popularity. During the period of SARS epidemics, thousands of thankful letters, hundreds of phone call and countless number of blessings from the public had given the frontline workers the best support to continue in their fight against this natural disaster. Comments from local and international professionals, as well as those from the 2 SARS review panels have been positive. The SARS Expert Panel reported in Oct 2003 says “The committee has studied in considerable details the chronology of events during the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong and heard a great deal of evidence from individuals and organizations that come from a wide background. The story that emerges is one of great courage and dignity, as Hong Kong struggled against this new disease.” The Report of Hospital Authority Review Panel commented on the performance of health care workers as “many healthcare workers, managers, government officials and others made heroic efforts in the face of danger to fight the disease and limit its effects... It is important to acknowledge that these were civilians sent into the theatre of war, with no end to the battle in sight and no grand plan for victory. The enemy was unforgiving and under certain circumstances extremely virulent. There were health care workers who volunteered to fight on the very frontline in ICUs, some taking their expertise from one ICU to another, following closely as the battle shifted...”

Never before had the health care workers themselves realize the sacredness of their job and the unique opportunity we are given to provide comfort (both physical and mental) to those who are in need. When we start to see young, health men and women come down with the pulmonary illness and become so breathless that they cannot even talk or finish their meal in just a matter of a few days, when we are forbidden to visit our loved one and hold their hands even when they are in critical conditions, when we watched on TV the excavation of Amoy Garden with their residents leaving their home in

tears and sorrow, our life begin to change. All too often, we have taken things in our life for granted. We did not realize how frail our health and physical wellness could be. They can be taken away from us overnight in a swift of natural disaster. We did not treasure people that we saw everyday, our family, husband and wife, parents and children, our colleagues and our friends, until the day when we can only see them on the monitor outside the hospital ward kept out of bound to visitors. We could not care less about the sanitary conditions of our environment, until the day when we saw the name of our apartment were listed on newspaper because one of our neighbor got SARS and being admitted to hospital. Value of life has been re-evaluated. Priorities have been re-assessed. Attitudes have been changed. When we face a patient in the clinic or in our hospital these days, we are reminded that these are human being with flesh and bones. They are not merely a diagnosis, a diseased organ, or worse still a case need to be disposed.

Never before the community of Hong Kong stand up in such solidarity, in face of great difficulty and danger. I saw thousands of volunteers on the street cleaning the environment and helping the elderly people in their homes. I heard artist, singers and composers came to together singing “We shall overcome”. Personal interests were put aside, politics and agenda were at least temporarily ignored, yet humanity and love prevailed.

Hong Kong has an admirable professional standard that is comparable to any developed country around the world. The medical profession is not just embraced for its standard of clinical practice, but also for its professionalism and ethics. As our orthopedic surgeons have now taken the prime responsibility to look after the aftermath of SARS, namely the complication of medical therapy, the challenge is on your shoulder. As a new member of this fraternity, the credibility of the profession is as much a responsibility of yours as of mine.

Once again, my congratulations to the new graduates of the College of Orthopedics of Hong Kong and Edinburgh.

Joseph JY SUNG