

How do you know when you have become a really good teacher?

by A/Prof Lee Kheng Hock, President, 25th Council, College of Family Physicians Singapore

it is not about teaching awards. You might rightly suspect that this is a case of sour grapes. In my more than 2 decades of teaching, I have only managed to snag a handful of low level awards. It might also sound hypocritical as I had been responsible for dishing out quite a number of teaching awards to others in my various roles as administrator of teaching programs. That is not to say that teaching awards are not good. On the contrary, the vast majority of recipients are good and decent teachers who truly deserve the appreciation for the sacrifice and good deeds that they had done as teachers. I just like to put up a case for the teachers who did not receive awards. They are not necessarily bad. In fact, many are really very good teachers.

A Bad Experience

I came to this conclusion some time back when I was a rookie medical educator. It was about fifteen years ago. At that time, I was a young GP running my own solo practice. Like many GP members of our College, I saw teaching as a professional duty and a very satisfying way of contributing back to our community. I was looking forward to giving a tutorial to a group of medical students who were attached to a new community hospital as part of their family medicine posting. I remembered that it was a busy morning clinic. Not wanting to be a bad role model for punctuality, I skipped lunch and rushed down to the hospital. Even then I was late by about 10 minutes. After frantically searching various levels of the unfamiliar hospital, I eventually I found the tutorial room with only 2 out of the 2 dozen or so students who were supposed to be there. I was told rather nonchalantly that the rest of the students were still having lunch and should be arriving soon. About half an hour past the appointed time, the rest of the students appeared minus 2 who were missing in action. Focusing my mind on my teacher role model, I put on a friendly smile and launched into my prepared lesson with gusto. About 10 minutes into the tutorial, one of the student stood up suddenly and walked past me and exited the classroom. I searched the blank faces of the rest of the students, looking for a clue as to what had caused that to happen. I sniffed the air to determine if someone had accidentally released bad air. I was sure I did not say anything inappropriate. Clueless as to what had happened, I shrugged my shoulders and continued with the lesson. Another 10 minute or so passed. The same student strolled past me again, took his seat and stared blankly ahead. I detected a hint of amusement in the expression of some of the students.

A concoction of dehydration, low blood sugar plus a dash of personal humiliation boiled over. I sternly asked the student what had happened. The excuse he gave was that he needed to visit the bathroom. I told him that the decent and courteous way would be to just acknowledge me and asked to be excused for a while before he left. I felt it was a teachable moment on professionalism. I told the whole class that medical school is not just about learning about diseases and treatment. It is mainly about how to become a doctor. I told them that this student's behavior was appalling because if he showed such disrespect to a senior colleague, I have

little confidence that he will respect a patient who is weak and vulnerable. The rest of the tutorial was without incident.

A few months later, I received the report of my performance as a tutor. It was the lowest that I have ever received in my career as a medical educator. A few more low scores like this and it would have been curtains for me as a teacher in the school. The smart thing to do I supposed, was to go against my instinct as a teacher and bite my tongue. Most of all, never offend any student and try your best to be the most popular teacher in school. Well, I do not think this is the right thing to do. I think we should avail ourselves to practical wisdom and teach where our moral compass guides us. Anyway, all was not lost. When I looked at my feedback form in detail, about half the students gave me very low scores. I was pleasantly surprised that the other half gave me really high scores. Like true artists, we should concentrate on those who appreciate our passion. For the ignorant, we should best leave them alone and let them find their good sense eventually. So I hang my bad feedback score alongside my teaching awards. If you receive low scores which are essentially no more than popularity ratings from students, don't be disheartened. As long as it was received because you were teaching according to your conscience and in the best interest of the learner and the greater community, you should wear it as a badge of honor.

Death of A Great Teacher

If you are not convinced, then let me tell you the story of the first martyr of education. Socrates of ancient Greece was widely accepted as the first and best teacher in history. His life history holds important lessons for anyone who aspire to be a really good teacher. Actually it might be more of a cautionary tale than an inspiring story for some. Many of you probably knew that it did not end well for Socrates. For being a really good teacher, Socrates was arrested by the authorities of the day and put on trial for corrupting the youth and impiety. Corrupting the youth meant that he taught them not to accept conventional wisdom and encouraged the students to think for themselves. The so called impiety was that he failed to acknowledge the "the gods that the city acknowledges" and "introducing new deities". In modern terms, it probably meant that he was not politically correct. So he was put on trial and promptly found guilty and sentenced to death. In those days, they were half-serious about death sentences for philosophers. Most were allowed to flee the city before the sentence was carried out and henceforth be exiled upon the threat of death. The problem was Socrates was a man of principle and held on that one should obey the rule of law. It all ended in a mess with Socrates being executed with a drink of hemlock and his accusers going down into the gutters of history in eternal odium.

Still not convinced? Then heed the example of the greatest teacher that ever lived on this planet. He was betrayed by his student, flogged in public and finally nailed to a cross until he died. So I hope you don't feel too bad if you got passed over for a teaching

award. Don't be despondent if you receive a low score from students if it was done in their best interest. On the other hand, I have no desire for martyrdom and would much prefer to continue the fight by flying under the radar. So how do you know if you are a good enough teacher, i.e. teach well but don't get served the proverbial hemlock during faculty happy hour?

I think teaching awards are a good guide to your level of diligence and a warranty of your personal safety. Be very heartened when you receive awards that are not given for popularity or for political correctness. So far I think those given out by our College are OK ☺

What I treasure most are the little unsolicited tokens and gestures of appreciation from those whom I have taught. The greatest mark of achievement is when you see your positive action as a teacher live on through your students as they pass the goodness forward



The Death of Socrates by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825)

Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931

Source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/436105>

into the many lives that they touch, as doctors and as teachers themselves. Look around and be happy. By the way, thanks for the awards and please spare me the hemlock.

■CM

9000 needles

An interview with a family physician who practices acupuncture

Interviewed by Dr Low Sher Guan Luke, FCFP(S), Council Member, Editor, College of Family Physicians Singapore

Whenever acupuncture is mentioned, the images of a person being punctured by multiple needles will jump into my mind. Not always the most pleasant image, or so I used to think. It was not until recently when I had more exposure to the practice of acupuncture by one of my colleagues that my worldview of acupuncture changed. College Mirror brings you an exclusive interview with Dr Richard Tan, a family physician who is also an acupuncturist, on how he uses acupuncture to complement conventional medicine to bring about better outcomes for his patients!

College Mirror (CM):

Hi Dr Richard Tan. I understand you are a family physician by training. Can you give us a short introduction of yourself and your previous work experience?

Dr Richard Tan (RT):

Hi, I graduated from NUS Med School in 1986

and thereafter obtained Grad Dip in Occupational Medicine, Grad Dip Acupuncture and Grad Dip Geriatric Medicine over the years.

I am also a Family Physician by track route as I had been practicing as a general practitioner since 1992. I had the privilege of working in various modes of GP such as running my own solo-practice, being partner in a group practice, was Clinical Director in a major group practice as well as a stint as full-time locum.

I am a Designated Factory Doctor and had worked in various industrial in-house clinics.

I was also a former head of Medico-Legal and as well as Medical Affairs and Head of Department in a private hospital and was the Senior Resident Physician in Urology in a restructured hospital and was a Principal Resident Physician in a community hospital too.

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