

# Can Family Medicine use Sun Tzu's Art of War 孙子兵法?

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**M**any know me as a fan of Star Wars and Star Trek, but only very few know me to be a fan of Sun Tzu's Art of War. It had not crossed my mind to write some of my experiences until a friend pointed out how interested I seemed to be in Sun Tzu's ways.

For some who may not already know, Sun Tzu 孙子 was a Chinese military general, strategist, and philosopher who lived in the Spring and Autumn period 春秋时代 of ancient China, roughly during 544 – 496 BC. His exploits were so successful that it led him to write a book in military tactics named The Art of War 孙子兵法. Despite the years that have gone by, many still turn to his books and teachings for wisdom and strength. Military strategists and officers refer to the tactics found within the ancient book for modern warfare. Some CEOs and directors even try to apply the timeless advice in the corporate world. Now you may ask me, "How can Luke possibly apply any of this in his everyday life?" I may not have applied much of it in my short and simple life, but I profess to have seen my fair share of leaders in family medicine applying such principles in furthering the cause of family medicine, as well as some others largely ignoring it, much to their peril. This is especially important when pushing boundaries and exploring new frontiers in family medicine. Not applying Sun Tzu's advice can come at great cost at times. If you are not aware of the wise advice of Sun Tzu, then you are in luck as I have picked the top 13 pearls to share. Do read on with an open mind.

## Similarities between an Army and a Family Medicine Department

The army is built to conquer or defend land. A family medicine department is built to serve patients. Both involve banding people together for a purposeful goal, with generals or heads of departments leading the team. The army conquers land while family medicine conquers the realm of primary care, transitional home care, subacute care, intermediate and long term care etc. so as to serve patients better, whichever setting they are in.

### On the weak and the strong, Sun Tzu advises that,

1. When the general is weak and without authority; when his orders are not clear and distinct; when there are no fixed duties assigned to officers and men, and the ranks are formed in a slovenly haphazard manner, the result is utter disorganization.
2. When the common soldiers are too strong and their officers too weak, the result is insubordination. When the officers are too strong and the common soldiers too weak, the result is collapse.

A good general and officer leads by example. There was a particular hospital which only had a handful of medical officers, and unfortunately there were not enough of them to be rostered for night calls. During the discussion that ensued, the question posed was what would happen when the medical officers needed to go on leave or took sick leave and their numbers were slashed further. The Division of Medicine head led

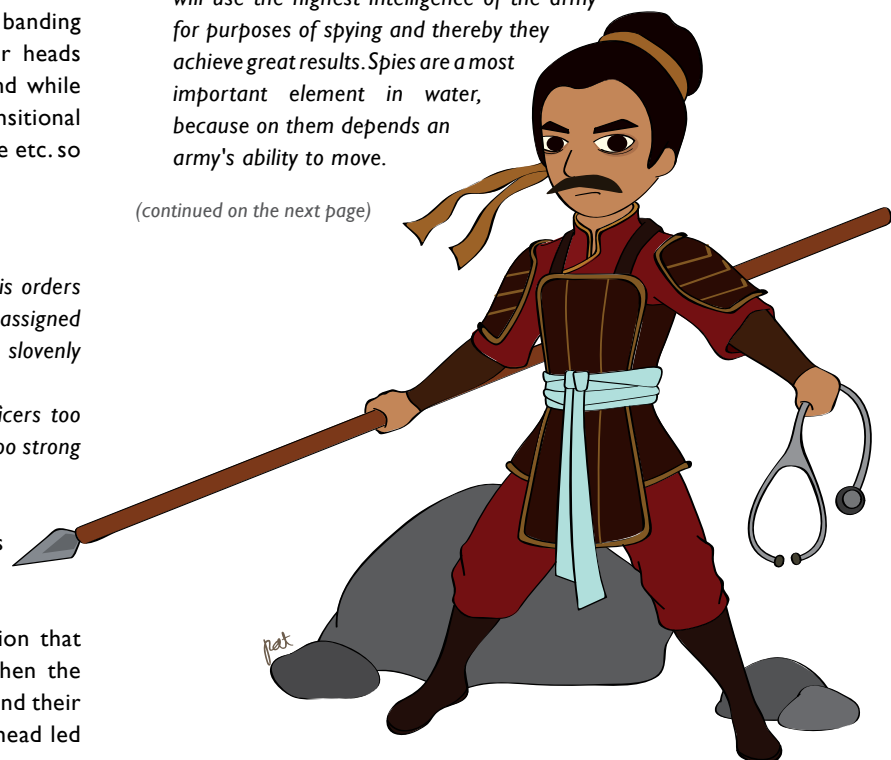
by example by volunteering to go on calls himself. He did not insist that the consultants to follow suit, but all other consultants agreed they will step up to the cause should the need arise. If the general volunteers to lead his soldiers personally into battle, how much lesser can the officers and soldiers themselves do, except to step up and fight along the general? Such is leadership by example.

Reporting lines should also be clear rather than complicated and crisscrossing, as this ensures that leaders in the middle rungs are given full control of their own teams to be nimble and versatile as and when the situation changes. The head of department can truly maximise the potential of the ranks below him only when he does not feel threatened himself and allow those with the required skill set to rise up to the occasion. Conversely, obsession with personal control and selfish power amongst the heads and senior leaders will only curb creativity and result in the exodus of capable staff who are always searching for more supportive institutions and departments where they can grow and be nurtured. An institution who fails to recognise and discourage a disruptive head will never be able to retain good staff and build a strong department.

### On the Use of Spies, Sun Tzu advises that,

3. We are not fit to lead an army unless we are familiar with the face of the country - its mountains and forests, its pitfalls and precipices, its marshes and swamps. (Intelligence)
4. Thus, what enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.
5. Hence it is only the enlightened ruler and the wise general who will use the highest intelligence of the army for purposes of spying and thereby they achieve great results. Spies are a most important element in war, because on them depends an army's ability to move.

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6. *If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.*

Spying and espionage are negative terms that are often spoken hush hushed, yet it is practiced no less abundantly in warfare. In the realm of family medicine, it may take the form of study trips, observing and learning from institutions with better practices. The heads and leaders have to be humble and recognize that there is room for improvement. Learning from his adversaries ensures that he is always one step ahead of the competition, to take the practice of family medicine to the next level and keep up with patients' ever increasing complexity.

#### **On variation in tactics, Sun Tzu advises that,**

7. *Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions.*
8. *He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain*

Staying predictably the same is the surest way to failure. Employing the same strategy all the time will guarantee a single and inevitable outcome – being overtaken by others who are constantly innovating. A team who is set up with the aim to remain status quo and stay comfortable will never want to move out of their comfort zone, and perhaps this team is staying employed for the wrong reasons. When such a team is pushed to innovate and squeezed out of their comfort zone, they will leave. Building such a team will be setting up for failure. The team may feel they are not ready to innovate, but that feeling will always be there. We are always our own greatest enemy. To conquer oneself is to win half the battle already. It is important to build a team with the aim of always improving tactics and doing things better.

Assess the battle situation and adapt accordingly. There is no such thing as a strategy that works forever, because the condition of the battlefield is ever changing. Our healthcare needs have evolved over the years, from episodic care arising from infectious diseases in the 1960s, to long term and continuing care arising from chronic lifestyle diseases in the 21st century. Primary care is certainly evolving. Polyclinics are changing from walk-in systems to partial/ full appointment systems in view of the long term continuing care that is required. GPs are now going onboard Community Health Assist Scheme (CHAS) and seeing more chronic care patients.

The increasingly complex needs of our patients demand that we continue to innovate our services and raise standards of care to cater to them. Planting primary care services in a hospital is simply not enough. Hospital family medicine is a different creature compared to primary care. Other countries including the Canadians and Americans have had decades of experience in various models of hospital family medicine that we can learn from. Restructured hospitals are now working closer with the polyclinics and GPs in their region, developing systematic patient workflows that right sites such patients to the community. We now proactively identify primary care providers in all our patients as far as possible, and involve these GPs in the post discharge care of these patients so that the care chain is not broken. We also try to raise up the standards of our GP partners through a structured system of CMEs, workshops and clinic/ ward attachments to cater to them as many have varying standards and needs, so that

they are able to push the care boundaries for their own patients if they so wish.

#### **On army courage and training/ operational standards, Sun Tzu advises that,**

9. *If in training soldiers commands are habitually enforced, the army will be well-disciplined; if not, its discipline will be bad.*
10. *The principle on which to manage an army is to set up one standard of courage which all must reach.*
11. *Place your army in deadly peril, and it will survive; plunge it into desperate straits, and it will come off in safety. For it is precisely when a force has fallen into harm's way that is capable of striking a blow for victory.*

#### **How did Sun Tzu came to the realisation that putting his team in death ground breeds deadly warriors?**

This saying came about when Sun Tzu was forced to make one of the biggest and most difficult decision in his life. His ally was being attacked by a strong foe, and he was finding ways to help his ally. However, instead of combining his army with that of his ally to form a fighting force, he chose to use his own army to divert the enemy's attention away from his allied forces (thus saving his ally in the process) and to lead them to a place where there was no way of retreat for his own forces. While we believed that this was a suicidal move, Sun Tzu believed that by not allowing his soldiers an alternative route of escape, they will be forced to fight for their survival. And true enough, his forces became very much mightier than usual and fought back hard against the enemies who far outnumbered them. The enemies were taken aback by the ferocity of the counter attack and suffered a crushing defeat!

An army needs a hierarchy of generals, strategists, commanders, lieutenants and infantry which are constantly training and upgrading in order to out-battle their enemies. Family medicine departments which do not put their own doctors through rigorous postgraduate training and develop a robust hierarchy of family medicine physicians comprising of the head, senior consultants, consultants, associate consultants, registrars, residents, resident physicians and medical officers, but instead recruit many resident physicians and junior doctors will face many challenges in doing the higher level of work that other family medicine departments are otherwise able to do. Just as it is important to learn, it is just as important to teach. Thus the saying that the best way to learn is to teach. Family medicine departments which participate in under- and post-graduate training programs will always see good trainees and residents pass through their doors, increasing the chances of attracting them to stay on in the department to do the good work.

The best way to sharpen the team is to put them in situations where they either perform or they perish. Such a team will always try to outperform themselves in order to survive, and whatever does not kill them will only make them stronger. In our modern day family medicine, the same can be said as well. Evolving primary care which comprises of our polyclinics, GP clinics and family medicine clinics is only half of the equation. The other half which is just as important may be to peg our hospital family medicine practice at a higher level so as to seamlessly bridge the gap between specialist-centric hospital care and primary care to facilitate the

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paradigm shift of care focus from hospitals to communities. Putting resources into training such hospital family medicine physicians and equipping them to consolidate complex medical care, manage subacute patients coming from other specialties, mobilise multiple disciplines such as nursing and various allied health practitioners to come together for the holistic care of complex patients, and transit these patients' care from hospitals to either primary care or even their own homes for long term care can help to achieve the needed paradigm shift. To train such a hospital family medicine physician would involve subjecting them to the most extreme of training and practice conditions in the hospital, to force them to train along other specialists and understand their thinking and management, pushing them to the top of the family medicine licence, leaving no easier alternatives. Such investment into both primary care and hospital family medicine will be needed to enable patients to be cared for in their homes and communities.

#### On tactical disposition and choice of generals, Sun Tzu advises,

*12. The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom.*

A man who sees greater things beyond himself and strives to achieve it for the greater good, is the sort of man that every institution should strive to work with. A humble man who is ready to admit his mistakes and who does not fear disgrace is always learning from his current mistakes which sets him up for future greater success. Institutions who inculcate such humble kaizen ways will find themselves improving their services all the time.

#### On army morale and relationships, Sun Tzu advises that,

*13. Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look on them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.*

Certain institutions somehow seem to have the ability to retain good men to stay on for the cause. While outsiders may not always know the winning formula in those places, the feedback given often covers the fact that the staff are treated with respect, and there is constant engagement between various levels of management, from senior management to staff on the ground, thus minimising dissent, dissatisfaction and the feeling that "the higher ups do not understand, or do not care". If the higher management strives to listen to the staff on the ground just like how parents always listen to their children and love them, then the staff will always find coming to work a positive experience. When the challenge comes, the staff will give their best shot knowing that their superiors will always look after their best interests. That form of mutual trust between the different levels goes a long way.

13 phrases from Sun Tzu's Art of War, hopefully to help advance family medicine along in her cause wherever it may be!

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