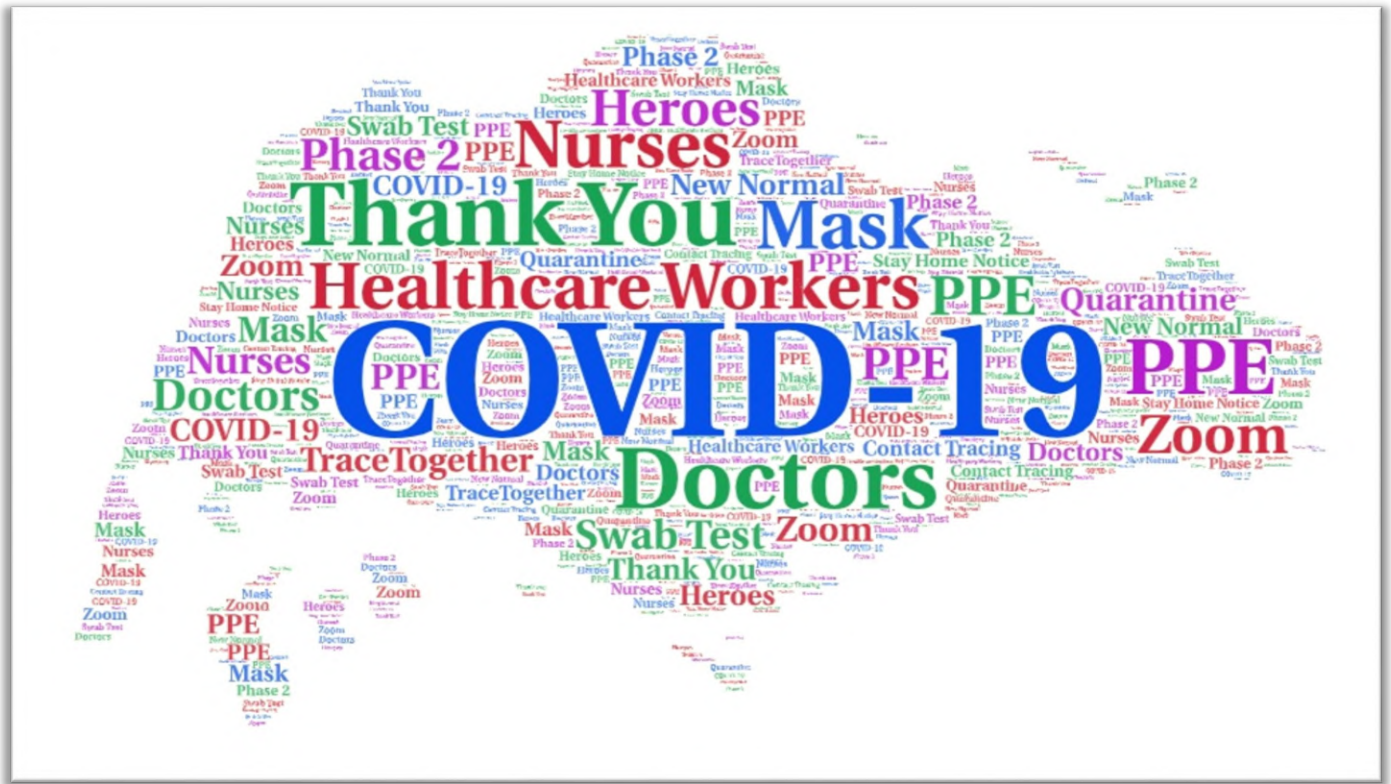


Leadership
In The
Year of COVID-19





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As I reflected on the COVID-19 pandemic that gripped the world this past year, I am reminded of the intersection of values and crisis in the leader. In times of crisis, whether we do the right thing often comes down to instinct, which is powerfully guided by who we are, by the values we hold.

In this special edition, we will hear from three senior healthcare leaders who were called upon to lead our public Health's response to the pandemic. We cheekily call this the "wartime" edition newsletter because the stories recounted here make reference to MINDEF, Commander's Intent, Taskforce, and fighting the last war. Important values and qualities shine through as our leaders share about the things they reflected on and learned in their service over this challenging period.

In this vein, I am reminded of the core values of Singapore's public service, which are Integrity, Service and Excellence. Borrowing the military theme, these values are mirrored in a formulation by the United States Air Force that I find particularly inspiring: Integrity first, Service before self, and Excellence in all that we do.

May these qualities abound in us at whatever level and in every circumstance where we are called to lead, in peace and in crisis.

Mr Dennis Loh
Deputy Director, HLC

Dean's Message

A Better Tomorrow

Wars, natural disasters, plagues befall all societies regardless.

This year we have seen a plague, the COVID-19 pandemic sweep across our globe. It is still rampant in many parts of the world. More than 1.6 million people have died from the virus itself. We are well aware that the impact has not just been medical but economic and the future in this sphere is very hard to predict. We do not know how badly countries have been affected but we know that this is a global shock like no other – shutting businesses, schools and borders. An economist said that the disease has caused an economic shock three times worse than the 2008 financial crisis. Will the world plunge into another Great Depression?

In Singapore the economy is expected to return to growth next year. We have relatively free movement, we are not in lockdown anymore. We have on the whole, as a government and society managed this crisis well. We were not perfect though. And we must give credit to the thinking behind decisions that were made many years ago. Principle, prudence and common sense have influenced our policy making for the past 50 years. Of particular relevance is the preparation that we put in place after SARS. And we can also see the wisdom in the large reserves that we built up and were able to use in this time of crisis.

In any crisis, not only does the economy suffer, humanity takes a blow too. Any adversity brings out the best and worst in leaders and people. Decisions good and bad have long term effects. Societies that are not prepared, disciplined or resilient suffer. Wrong decisions are eventually punished and the question that we, as leaders, must ask is this - who bears the brunt. If we are short-sighted and care only about solving issues for the immediate moment without considering the long term consequences, then we have not been fair to those whom we lead.

We must acknowledge that the migrant workers' crisis during this pandemic did reflect the attitude that we have as a society for these men who are contributing towards building our country. In a number of areas, we do not consider them as our equals and this needs to change.

One crucial decision was when our Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong said that we should treat the migrant workers as we would treat our fellow Singaporeans. This was a pivotal point for our nation and hugely important for the values of our society. If he had not said that and if we had acted any differently, Singapore would have borne the stain of this decision for many generations.

Disease does not discriminate. In the face of COVID-19, it does not matter what race, nationality, or office you hold. In our highly interconnected world, no one is safe till everyone is safe. And as we start to see the promise of vaccines to bring an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, let us likewise hope that our economies and values will emerge stronger and more resilient.

I wish you all a better 2021.



Professor Aymeric Lim

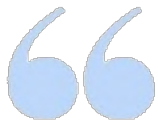
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A/Prof Kenneth Mak
 Director of Medical Services
 (Health Services Group)
 Ministry of Health, Singapore

Dear Young Leaders,

You may not know this: when I was introduced as “Director of Medical Services” at the first Multi-ministry Task Force press conference, I had not been formally appointed as DMS yet. I was the DMS designate, preparing to take over from A/Prof Benjamin Ong. COVID-19 accelerated that transition dramatically.



In times of uncertainty, learn to understand the intent and mission-focus of your leaders. And if you are leading, share your intent to guide those under your charge.

As a surgeon by profession, I am more comfortable in the operating theatre or clinic than in front of cameras, members of the media, and answering questions live on TV. As the DMS designate, it was the right thing for me to take the lead, as we foresaw that the pandemic would extend beyond the incumbent DMS’ term in office. I had to learn to step up and play a domain leadership role, and to be comfortable doing things I was not used to.

I am grateful to my colleagues for their support and hard work during that period. In the early days, there was much uncertainty and, as DMS, the public looked to me for answers. I found it important to have a deep sense of humility and acknowledge that I did not have all the cards. The expertise existed outside of myself, and this required team-based leadership and collegiality to bring everyone together to address the tasks at hand. Even the media, whom some might assume were present to question or interrogate the task force,

were aligned in wanting to share the most important information and updates with the nation.

Though the pandemic is not over yet, I would like to share a few important lessons: In times of uncertainty, learn to understand the intent and mission-focus of your leaders. And if you are leading, share your intent to guide those under your charge. When the situation is developing rapidly and there is a lot of uncertainty, understanding the “commander’s intent” will help you make decisions that are aligned with the organisation without having a full picture.

Second, keep grounded to your personal and organisational values, especially when exercising leadership and influence over others and over decisions. As your leadership responsibilities grow, decisions will need to be made drawing on your domain expertise and also your values. Some values are broadly defined and accepted, but it is important to be clear about what these mean to you on a personal level.

And lastly, stay humble and honest, especially when you are under pressure. The people around you are more likely to follow your lead if you are genuine and slow to anger – even better if you are able to learn to laugh at yourself. I laughed when I saw the internet memes after that press conference when I coughed on camera.



When the situation is developing rapidly and there is a lot of uncertainty, understanding the “commander’s intent” will help you make decisions that are aligned with the organisation without having a full picture.



Mr Chan Yeng Kit
Permanent Secretary (Health),
Republic of Singapore



Using the military analogy of fighting the last war, we were prepared for a short, sharp battle like what happened during SARS. However, COVID-19 did not behave like SARS. So we had to modify our approach along the way.

I had the privilege (some say misfortune) of being plunged into the midst of the COVID-19 crisis not long after stepping into my 11th posting in public service. The “crisis of a generation,” as PM put it, has reinforced some key leadership principles I learnt over the years. I hope to share this with you to encourage you as you continue your leadership journey.

People Are Most Important

It may sound like a cliché, but I strongly believe that people are the most important wherever you go. We all work in teams, even surgeons do not do their work alone, but rely on a team in the operating theatre to support them in the work of healing patients.

COVID-19 was a major challenge for me. Ideally, a leader should know his people well and has built a wealth of social capital. That was something I did not have, having moved to the Ministry of Health (MOH) just before the pandemic struck Singapore. I was fortunate to have great colleagues and an experienced team with good people who knew the ground, exercised initiative and worked together to tackle the novel situation.

In my previous posting at MINDEF, there was a lunch club that all senior officers must subscribe to. I was able to meet colleagues in a casual setting. This provided precious opportunities to hear their candid personal views on issues and policies, beyond what was surfaced through official channels. Interpersonal trust was built through such informal engagements, and I cherish this as an important way to have

an ear to the ground. Now that we are not able to meet as often, I have had to be more deliberate and intentional to get to know members of the MOH team better.

United As One

Looking back at the last ten months, a major source of encouragement for me personally was seeing a whole-of-government resolve at work, both in healthcare and in the wider civil service, as everyone rallied together to fight COVID-19. The display of unity was unprecedented in scope and intensity, far surpassing that during the 2003 SARS outbreak.

When MOH had to go around to ask for resources and volunteers, no ministry turned down the requests. The same united spirit was seen within the MOH family – clusters & agencies standing up to face the challenge together, from assuaging manpower needs to running medical facilities at foreign worker dormitories.

By and large, we have done well in our COVID-19 response. There were, of course, many areas we could have done better. We will do a full after-action review to identify and close any gaps, even as we constantly examine and improve our operations. For example, our starting point for COVID-19 was based on the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) because that was the last major outbreak. Using the military analogy of fighting the last war, we were prepared for a short, sharp battle like what happened during SARS. However, COVID-19 did not behave like SARS. So we had to modify our approach along the way. This is something that we have to learn and adapt as we face more complex challenges going ahead.

Changing Wheels of Moving Bus

Beyond COVID-19, there are many areas in the healthcare domain that we want to work on. MOH existed even before Singapore's self-governance. Our predecessors are smart people. So, it is almost a given that everything worthwhile to think about, our predecessors would probably have

thought about, and put in place what was the best policy or measure for that time. Therefore, understanding their rationale and choices made are important.

That is not to say that we do not change, because the operating context within which those decisions were made might have changed. This then is the impetus for leaders to understand the current environment and what changes this bears on our policies and programmes, and how we then make the necessary changes to bring the healthcare system forward.



The complexity of change in healthcare is enormous – akin to changing the wheels of a moving bus. The system cannot afford to stop for a second. Yet, transformation is crucial, not necessarily because the system or policies are broken, but because the wider environment has evolved and the population we are serving has changed. Like a bus with worn-out tyres, change is often needed to avoid a blowout and ensure the going remains smooth.

Our healthcare system may not be perfect. But it is the envy of many around the world. May we work together to make it better, and may you as leaders be part of and lead that change.



COVID-19

Looking back, 2020 has really been a roller coaster ride for all of us in the healthcare family. I am really thankful to all our healthcare members for your hard work and sacrifices over the last few months. You have all stood up to the challenges and shouldered all that was asked of you during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Multi-Ministry Taskforce was able to implement our plans, with the assurance that we have a well-trained and committed team on the ground. I know many of you have been stretched almost to your limits.

Painful though this year has been, we also learnt many important lessons, which will prepare us better for the future when another crisis hits us.

The first lesson that we learnt very quickly is that we must always be prepared to expect the unexpected and not assume that we can just replicate what had worked in the past. SARS and H1N1 had taught us many lessons. But as we have seen, COVID-19 posed very different challenges from these past diseases and we had to quickly adapt and find new solutions. And this is the most important lesson – future disease outbreaks will not be the same as the current COVID-19 pandemic, we must always be nimble, flexible and ready to change our plans when new evidence emerge.

The second critical learning point which we realized was the



Mr Gan Kim Yong
Minister for Health
Republic of Singapore



And this is the most important lesson – future disease outbreaks will not be the same as the current COVID-19 pandemic, we must always be nimble, flexible and ready to change our plans when new evidence emerge.

need to always be prepared and build resilience: in our supply chains i.e. medical, food and other key resources; as well as in our healthcare system so that we can respond effectively to any crisis.

In a crisis, there is also opportunity – COVID-19 has given us many opportunities to transform. Telehealth has gained significant momentum this year, surpassing all our efforts to encourage it over the last 5 years. Many patients preferred not to go to the clinics and have tele-consult with their doctors instead to avoid exposure to infections. We hope to continue to leverage on technology to help us be more efficient, cost effective and transform for better health outcomes. COVID-19 has also strengthened the partnership with the private healthcare providers. The trust between us has been further deepened and I hope that this partnership will continue in the future even after COVID-19.

Beyond the public health crisis, the economic crisis is going to last longer. Singapore’s economy will be significantly affected. We must brace ourselves for the long haul and stay united so that we can emerge stronger.

The war with COVID-19 is not over yet. Even after safe and effective vaccines have been developed, it will take some time for vaccines to be produced and distributed widely. We have to continue exercising vigilance and self-discipline in order to contain the COVID-19 virus and keep the transmission rates low. We cannot let our guard down as the second or third wave might be just around the corner as seen in many countries.

Let’s continue to soldier on together – we cannot let COVID-19 stop what we have been building so far. I wish you all good health and thank you all for what you have done and continue to do for Singaporeans and Singapore.

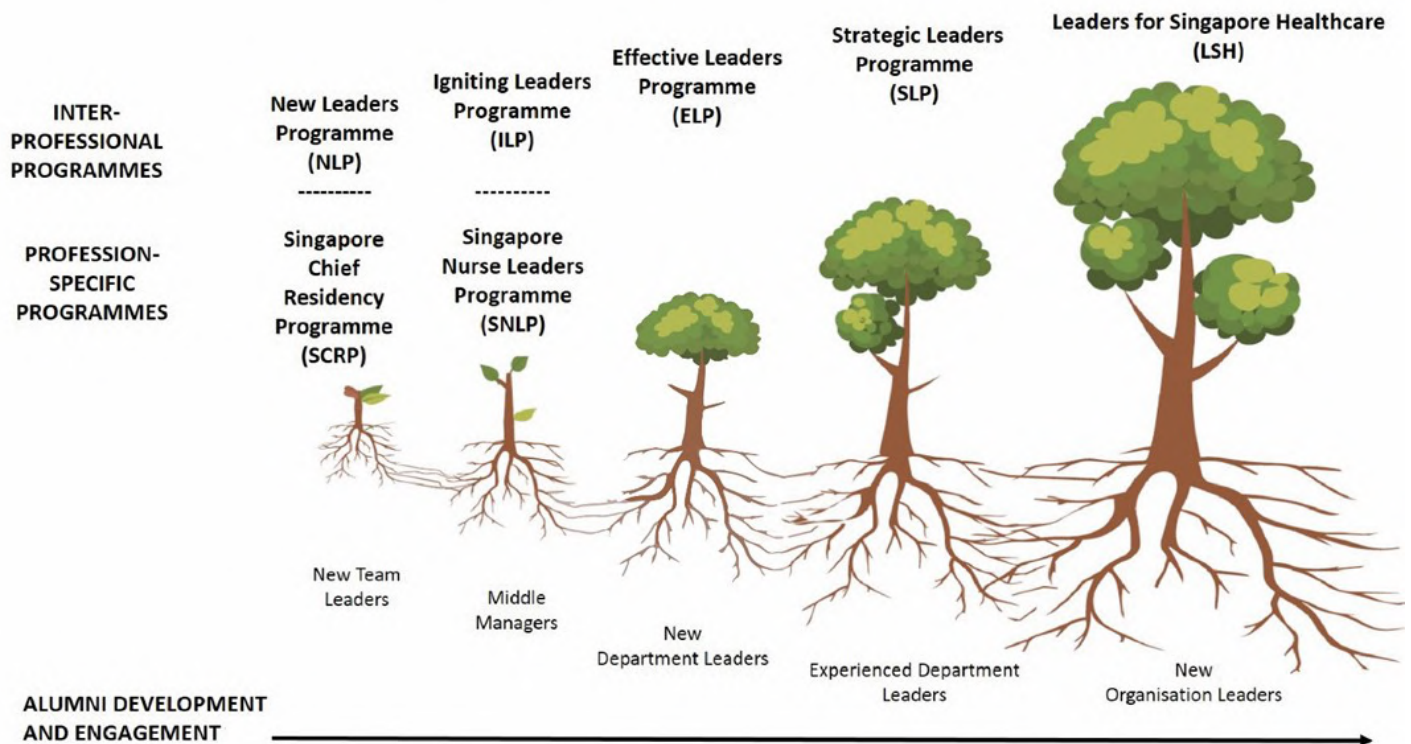


WISHING
YOU A
Merry
Christmas

AND A
Happy
New
Year!



HLC Milestone Leadership Programmes



About the Healthcare Leadership College

The Healthcare Leadership College (HLC), a division of MOH Holdings, supports the building of strong leadership capacity and capabilities for our national healthcare system, in line with the Ministry of Health’s vision and strategic priorities. We develop and deliver high quality programmes and other learning platforms for public healthcare leaders, covering topics such as leadership and organisational development, public service ethos and values, and key healthcare policies and issues.

Find out more here: www.hlc.mohh.com.sg

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