

Care Concern and Cope in Reproductive Health: Ethical Dilemma in a Changing Environment of Thai Healthcare

Kamheang Chaturachinda MB ChB FRCOG

* *The Royal Thai College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists*

Recent changes in social and political context in Thailand had resulted in unfolding changes in Thailand's healthcare scene.

The recast in the reproductive health care was initiated by advances in biotechnology-information technology and accelerated by the percolation of economic globalization from the West. Thailand, always being receptive to changes from Western Hemisphere, accepted this global trend readily. These globalization trends which emphasized commercial competition and unrelenting consumerism, in the market place, effect every sectors of Thai Society, medical community not withstanding.

In the public sector the effect is augmented further by the new constitution of BE 2540 (AD 1997) which reinforced individual rights; reform of government; rights to quality education; equal access to quality health care; public participation in policy decision; transparency and accountability of government.

This new constitution, incidentally, resulted in the present Taksin Government, which has a parliamentary majority of the magnitude unseen in the previous history of Thai politic.

From Healthcare perspective there is a paradigm change. Previously Health is regarded not as a basic right for every one. A fee-for-service is the norm. While for those who cannot afford it the government provides free service which is slow with an uneven quality. Equal access and quality control is usually wanting.

Since the new government came in to power with the stated policy of Universal Health Coverage,

Keywords : *Ethical, Thai, Healthcare*

J Med Assoc Thai 2004; 87(Suppl 3): S114-5

Correspondence to : Chaturachinda K, The Royal Thai College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 8th Floor, The Royal Golden Jubilee Building, 2 Soi Soonvijai, New Petchburi Road, Bangkok 10310, Thailand. Phone: 0-2716-5712, 0-2716-5714, Fax: 0-2716-5720

the National Health Security Act was unanimously enacted in AD 2002. The National Health Security Office (NHSO) now becomes a major buyer of healthcare services from the healthcare providers. It also ensures equal access and uniform quality service countrywide.

This sea change resulted in a number of far reaching challenges, covering many aspects of healthcare such as medical manpower; payment for services; equal access to services; quality assurance; procurement of medical supply and technology; standardization of service, and finally efficient management of the system.

The change from Fee-for-service payment to Capitation payment took the Thai medical community by surprise. Even though this change of paradigm has occurred, still, this change is incomplete. The key questions remain. Firstly, equal access of quality care for all and secondly, what is the "appropriate cost"? There remains, still, a duality in healthcare service. For those who can afford private care, there is a choice. For those who cannot afford the private care, this change in policy bring access of reasonable quality healthcare to all. For healthcare providers (such as obstetricians and gynecologists) ethical dilemma remains whether to provide excellent care with sophisticated high tech (and high cost) to a few who can afford it or to provide needed care with appropriate technology at affordable cost to all. This dilemma is further escalated by the dualistic policy created by the government, with stated populist policy on one hand, of creating equal access of quality care at low cost for all, while on the other to elevate Thailand to be the excellent Medical Hub of Asia, providing hi-class, hi-tech medical service, at regional competitive price, for those who can afford to buy such services. This dual tract recently resulted in an internal "brain drain" from Government service to the private sector.

The "brain drain" in turn creates shortage of providers in the public sector. This shortage of medical manpower triggered a predictable response of increase production of physicians by the

Government. At the same time the use of hi-tech in this market driven practice often resulted in hi-tech over use and misuse with inevitable cost escalation. To thoughtful physicians, constant reflexion of healthcare and medicine as a Social Goods or as a commercial product to be traded, will remain through out this changing time.

However Thai culture based on Buddhist Teaching, of caring for the sick with 'KWAM METTA'

or Compassion and also treating the sick as your loved ones, remains the underlying basis of conduct for the majority of Thai Physicians.

Like a Chinese proverb which says "confusion is the first step on the road to wisdom" the changing healthcare scene and the continue dilemma, hopefully will lead to better use of available resources; equal access to quality service, and in the end to better reproductive health of Thai women.
