Letter to the Editor – How to write one

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Dr Lawrence NG, former Editor of The Singapore Family Physician

Colleague Family Physicians Singapore

The art of writing a letter to a medical journal is, in most aspects, similar to that of writing to a lay journal such as a newspaper.

“Singapore has it right with family clinics”
Letter to The Straits Times Forum 29 Oct 2009

More in US turn to retail clinics instead of docs (Oct 7), is apt and encouraging. The concept of retail clinics is akin to private family physician clinics in Singapore. The quality of care is high as many are run by medical doctors; some even with training in family medicine. These clinics run blood tests and dispense medicine, saving the public the inconvenience of buying medicine elsewhere. The profit from the sale of medicine helps to contain and control the ever-increasing practice costs, which is the bane of the United States health care system.

In the US, one usually seeks consultation with the respective specialists first. In Singapore, we are blessed with family physicians as the primary care providers as well as the coordinators for complex care. They charge a lower fee, are easily available in the heartland, and after office hours, and usually have excellent doctor-patient relationships. Patients can just walk in at their convenience without making an appointment. However, family physicians also know their limits and refer patients to their specialist colleagues for more intensive and expert management when needed. Thus patients avoid going to a specialist of the wrong discipline and this prevents unnecessary delays in treatment.

The average bill size at a clinic run by a family physician is $40 to $80, including medicine, while that of a general practitioner is usually $30 to $50. Both are way below those quoted in the studies, thus is US$110 ($154) in the US.

For the less well-off here, the Government has provided polyclinics and public hospitals whose services are of reasonably good quality, with government subsidies, the price cannot be matched anywhere else.

While medical insurance is essential for all, not all will be covered by insurance companies. There are many reasons for this. One is selection. Usually the schemes cover those who do not need insurance and exclude those who need it but cannot afford the high premiums. This is a lesson we must learn from the American experience.

Our system offers a plethora of medical services for us to choose from, according to our means, our needs and our desires.

Dr Leong Choon Kit

Here are some general guidelines that one may find useful:

1. State the argument you are responding to, concisely, in the letter's introduction.
   Don't do a lengthy rehash; it's a waste of valuable space and boring as well.
   If you are referring to a previously published letter or article, identify it by its headline and the date it was published.
2. Keep to a single subject.
   Deal with one issue in each letter.
3. Don't be loud or abusive.
   Editors tend to ignore letters containing personal attacks.
4. Your letter should be logically organized.
   First a brief layout of the argument you are opposing, followed by stating your own position. Then present your evidence.
   Close with a short restatement of your position or a precise comment.
   Out to the chase. You don't need a long, rambling introduction to your subject.
   Just focus on one or two key points that you want to make and then get out.

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5. Use facts, figures and expert testimony whenever possible. 
   Readers respect the opinions of people with special knowledge or 
   expertise. Use expert testimony to bolster your argument.

6. Proofread your letter carefully for errors in spelling, punctuation and 
   grammar. Editors will usually edit to correct these mistakes, but your piece 
   is more likely to be published if it is “clean” to begin with. 
   Read your letter to a friend, for objective input.

7. Try to view the letter from the reader’s perspective. 
   Will the arguments make sense to someone without a special 
   background on this issue.

8. Should your letter be typed? In this day and age, generally yes. 
   Double or triple space the letter if it is short. 
   For faxing purposes, editors appreciate it if the letter is all on one 
   page, so single spacing might be the only option available.

9. Direct your missives to “Letters to the Editor,” or some similar 
   sounding title. 
10. Always include your 
    • name, 
    • address, 
    • day-time phone number and signature. 
   Keep in mind that most publications verify by phone or in writing 
   that you, and not someone attributing these opinions to you, authored the 
   letter.

11. Most important: WRITE! 
   Do not try to do a perfect letter. 
   Just give it a good effort and send it off. 
   Letter writing is the one thing that any one of us can do on our 
   own without the need to work through a group.