

Protest of Korean Medical Doctors against the Government Policy in 2000

The Year 2000! It was a year of big crisis for Korean doctors. And the crisis is still there. For the first time in Korean history, medical doctors in every sectors and with every specialties gave up their practice and went out on strike for nearly four months. It was initiated by the premature and unprepared implementation of the separation policy of the Korean Government in dispensing drugs from medical practice. At the very beginning, the strike was thought to be driven simply by the negative impact on the doctors' revenue. As time goes on, however, it became clear that the crisis was caused neither by the issue of revenue nor by a conflict between the two interest groups of pharmacists and medical doctors. Rather, it was due to the problems of principles and philosophy in Korean health care system. What made the Korean medical doctors protest the governmental policy was the long history of distorted medical policy and system. One simple example would be that the new government policy would fail to properly regulate illegal medical practice by Korean pharmacists prevailing during the past several decades. Negotiations between the government, pharmacists, and doctors seemed to have settled the strike. However, it could not be the ultimate answer for the underlying issue. Risks heralding another crisis lie not only on the temporary compromise that is just a reflection between the interests of medical doctors and pharmacists but also on the new system that apparently neglect the patient's inconvenience. Growing are the public concerns regarding the complaints of patients, especially of the elderly ones.

There were many other issues that drove medical doctors to strike. The irrational system of medical insurance is a good representative. According to the Korean medical insurance system, fee for medical service has been unbelievably low. For example, USD 40 is enough for normal delivery. Nonetheless, when an obstetrician is sued for malpractice, the claim asked to him or her used to be almost half-million dollars. In a word, Korean people ask more than they pay for medical service. The ambivalent standards shown toward medical service by Korean people and government put conscientious medical doctors in dilemma. Average Korean medical doctor have made desperate efforts to survive in this hostile environment. Young Korean medical doctors have little hopes

for their future. Even though medical insurance fee in Korea is about a quarter of that of average OECD country, the Korean people want to keep the quality of medical service at the same level. There has been no consensus who is responsible for the remaining three quarters. If the government is ready to pay, the Korean medical system will be based on social welfare system as in most European countries. If financial resources of the government are not enough, free market system as in the United States could be the answer. In the latter case, medical system should be based on private medical insurance. However, there seems to be no indication when this kind of issue should be resolved by the Korean populist government equipped with an egalitarian concept.

How can the Korean medical doctors resolve this kind of conflict? There should be a social consensus on the reasonable fee for the decent medical service. The roles of doctors and pharmacists should be clearly defined. Mistakes of governmental policy of expanding education for pharmacists in the 1960s was the background of the blurred roles. The Korean medical insurance system should be reformed on a realistic basis. How can we make this happen? Should medical doctors strike repeatedly to get the final resolution? Medical reform should be made within a reasonable social milieu and in appropriate contracts amongst the relevant parties. The contract should be made on the table, not by a strike. To accomplish these goals, communication is necessary not only between general population and medical doctors, but also between different groups of medical doctors.

Establishment of decent medical environment requires every efforts of medical society. For this, we should be more self-disciplined. Before requesting the people and government for medical reform, Korean medical society itself should be properly reformed. We all hope no more medical doctors' strike in this country!

Dae Seog Heo, M.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Internal Medicine,
Seoul National University Hospital,
Seoul 110-744, Korea