

The recent alleged involvement of doctors in terrorist plots has sent shockwaves around the world. But doctors have always been involved in politics, usually motivated by a need to serve their communities, as individuals or on a national or international level. Some have even deserted medicine to pursue a political career.

Dr Sun Yat-Sen, our national father, was one of the first two graduates from the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese (the forerunner of The University of Hong Kong) in 1892. He practised medicine briefly in Hong Kong during 1893 before engaging full time in politics. Dr Sun founded the Republic of China in 1912 after his party successfully overthrew the Qing dynasty.

Former Malaysian prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad studied for his medical degree in Singapore but spent most of his working life as a politician, serving more than 22 years as the leader of Malaysia before retiring in 2003.

In Hong Kong, a number of doctors have been appointed to political positions, especially during the colonial period. Over the last 50 years, six doctors have been appointed to the Executive Council and four to the Legislative Council. Three doctors, namely Sir Sik-nin Chau, Sir Albert Rodrigues and Sir Harry Fang, were members of both councils. At least seven doctors were also elected to the now disbanded Urban and Regional Councils. Two occupied key positions as Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the respective councils, and Dr Denny Mong-hwa Huang sat in the Urban Council from 1968 to 1986.

District councils play a special role in the political system and public administration. Twenty years ago the district council forerunners, district boards, were made up entirely of government-appointed members most of them active community personalities.

Around that time, the first elections for Hong Kong's lawmaking body, the Legislative Council, were introduced. Initially, representatives of functional or professional groups were elected to sit alongside appointed and official councillors. This was the beginning of more medical involvement in the political machinery: four doctors have represented the medical and dental constituency over the years, two

urologists and two who were concurrent presidents of the Hong Kong Medical Association. During that time, four doctors represented their districts in the Legislative Council.

Political office is a special kind of community service for doctors, with a focus on health care issues and the needs of our profession, however most doctors are not enthusiastic about getting into politics. Only small numbers contest elections involving doctors: of 512 councillors in the 18 district councils, only seven are doctors and three of these are appointed councillors.

District councils are, in essence, representative (of the local electorate) and consultative (to the government) community services bodies, so having medical professionals on them is crucial. Our input on health-related matters is useful, particularly when acting as a bridge between the councillors and representatives of the Department of Health and Hospital Authority.

Lack of time is a key barrier to medical involvement in public office. The District Council is not as demanding as the Legislative Council or even professional bodies such as the Hong Kong Medical Association and the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine. Nonetheless, council meetings are often long and last for several hours. Other council activities and functions often clash with clinic opening hours. This makes it very difficult for private practitioners, especially general practitioners, who are supposed to be in their clinic during opening hours. Moreover, it is not practical to use a locum because of the unforeseeable length of meetings and untimely non-routine functions. Financial loss is another key factor: the allowance paid by the government cannot compensate for losses arising from clinic absences while attending meetings and council functions, let alone cover payment to a locum.

What motivates doctors to get into politics? Serving the community is the goal for many. By training and, in a way, professional culture, doctors tend to be conservative but we do take a sensible and scientific approach to problems and offer new solutions.

BEN FONG