

NUS medical school sees greater diversity in intake

It wants doctors with right values and skills to better handle challenges in healthcare

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Singapore's oldest and largest medical school now has students with more diverse academic backgrounds to better deal with healthcare challenges, following changes in the way applicants are evaluated.

Associate Professor Chong Yap

Seng, dean of the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, told *The Straits Times* in an interview that in recent years, more polytechnic graduates and students from a wider range of junior colleges are being admitted.

The school admitted 280 out of some 2,000 applicants this year. Around 40 per cent of incoming freshmen are from junior colleges that are not among the top-ranked.

Prof Chong attributed the trend to

the rising calibre of JC and polytechnic students and to a new admission system, saying: "Selecting students for medical school should not be just about grades, but about whether they have the right skills and values to be good doctors."

Singapore's chief health scientist and executive director of the Health Ministry's Office for Healthcare Transformation yesterday echoed this emphasis on skills and values in a commencement speech.

Addressing this year's NUS medical school graduates, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan said they should not focus overly on becoming narrow specialists.

As patients age, they develop multiple medical conditions, and their health and well-being are also affected by social, economic and environmental factors. This shows the importance of holistic patient care.

"There is clearly a tension between this need and the trend towards greater medical specialisation... My hope is that you would not overly focus on becoming narrow specialists but keep yourself sufficiently grounded in broader-based medical practice," he added.

"There is a crucial and growing role for good family physicians and generalist doctors, and I hope you would consider these as compelling

options for the future."

Prof Tan, a former NUS president, also addressed the concern that trust in general is diminishing and trust in experts is being eroded.

He found this worrying as the doctor-patient relationship, the effectiveness of the healthcare system and the partnership between the health professions and society at large are grounded on trust. "It is therefore critical that all of us in the health professions work on this together, to actively contribute to building trust with our patients and the wider community," he added.

Factors like empathy are key. NUS' medical school assesses applicants beyond grades, and evaluates them on attributes such as empathy and teamwork via a series of interviews. They are also tested on how they make judgments in real-life scenarios. Shortlisted students get interviewed at several stations, with doctors, nurses and even people posing as patients speaking to them.

"Doctors should not come from just one segment of society. It is good if they come from different

backgrounds and bring different strengths," said Prof Chong, who took over as dean in January.

The school is also introducing courses in areas such as health informatics, social determinants of health and health economics to nurture doctors who can adapt to new knowledge, interventions and changing patterns of illness.

"There are many challenges facing Singapore's healthcare system. But the key to overcoming these challenges lies in nurturing compassionate, competent and innovative future doctors," said Prof Chong.

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Ex-combat medic lands spot in NUS medicine on third try

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Coming from Pioneer Junior College and with a grade “C” marring his otherwise perfect A-level results, Mr Tan Ying Li did not think he would make it to the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

When he did not succeed with his first two applications, he was ready to settle for his second choice – to study mathematics.

To his surprise, he ended up being one of the 280 selected from 2,000 applicants to the medical school this year.

Said the 21-year-old: “I was a combat medic when I was doing my national service and I realised how being a doctor can be challenging yet very meaningful, because you get to save lives.

“I come from Pioneer Junior College – not the brand name JCs like Raffles Institution or Hwa Chong where most medical students come from. I have not heard of any of my seniors from Pioneer JC getting into NUS medicine. And although I had mostly As for my A levels, I also scored a “C” for my General Paper. So I didn’t think I stood

much of a chance,” he added.

Associate Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of NUS medicine, told *The Straits Times* in an interview that in recent years, the faculty has drawn more polytechnic graduates and students from a wider range of junior colleges – beyond the usual suspects RI, Hwa Chong, National JC, Victoria JC and Anglo-Chinese School (Independent). Of late, 40 per cent of the incoming freshmen have come from other junior colleges, including Yishun Innova Junior College and Tampines Meridian Junior College.

In recent years, the school has also drawn between five and 10 polytechnic graduates. In previous years, it was just one or two.

This year, the school received six polytechnic graduates, including Mr Nicholas Chan, who was the first Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduate to get into the school. Mr Chan, 23, studied nursing in ITE, and then went to Nanyang Polytechnic before applying to study medicine at NUS.

The faculty draws more than 2,000 applicants a year and most have a string of As, or in the case of poly graduates, near perfect or perfect grade point averages of four.

Prof Chong noted the rising calibre of polytechnic students,

adding: “Some polytechnic students do well because they tend to be slightly older and more mature. They also show qualities such as empathy and compassion. In fact, Mr Nicholas Chan had one of the highest admission scores.”

Prof Chong, who took over as dean in January and is also senior consultant in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the National University Hospital, is a highly respected scholar and researcher in foetal growth and early development.

Noting that the faculty marked its 114th anniversary this year, he said: “Selecting students for the medical school should not be just about grades, but about whether they have the right skills and values to be good doctors.”

The faculty is introducing courses in areas such as health informatics, social determinants of health and health economics to nurture doctors who are able to adapt to new knowledge, interventions, therapeutics and changing patterns of illness.

The medical school is also studying the possibility of allowing more flexibility to students who want to combine their medical studies with other related courses or training, said Prof Chong.



“Every year we have students who take a gap year to try their hand at a start-up, take up a liberal arts course or a design course,” he said.

“It opens up options for them and enables them to combine the practice of medicine with other fields – be it health economics and administration or inventing new medical devices.”

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Mr Tan Ying Li, who went to Pioneer Junior College, was among the 280 selected to NUS’ medical school. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAN YING LI

One in five NUS medical students gets financial help

The National University of Singapore’s (NUS) medical degree course is the most competitive course to get into. It is also the most expensive – charging almost \$29,000 in tuition fees a year. So one would expect a large number of students entering the school to come from fairly affluent families who can afford to pay the high fees.

But figures from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine show that almost one in five of its students comes from homes with a monthly per capita income of \$1,900, which qualifies them for financial aid from the school. The figure is higher than the 16.8 per cent of undergraduates universitywide at NUS who received financial aid for the academic year of 2017.

The bursaries and scholarships from the school cover tuition fees. Students who need more aid are also given help in meeting their living expenses.

NUS medicine dean Chong Yap Seng said the admissions process is need-blind. The school received over 2,000 applications this year and selected 280. “We don’t look at whether a student will be able to pay the fees. Just whether he or she will make a good doctor. No student will be denied the opportunity to study medicine at NUS because he is unable to pay the tuition fees,” he added.

Ms Vernicia Neo, 20, for one, is grateful for the help. The first-year medical student, who will soon be starting on her second year of studies, said her taxi driver father’s yearly income is less than the \$29,000 yearly tuition fees for the undergraduate medical fee.

“There’s no way my father will be able to afford the fees. In fact, when I got (in), both my dad and my mum, who is a housewife, were very happy, but they also worried about the fees. Luckily for us, I qualified for financial help,” said Ms Neo, who gives private tuition during the holidays to pay for her living expenses.

Sandra Davie

Fight for your patients, NUS valedictorian tells fellow medical grads

Tan Tam Mei

Coming from a single-parent household where finances were tight has taught Dr Arturo Neo, 24, to work hard for what he wants.

And the newly minted doctor has done just that.

During his valedictorian speech at the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) University Cultural Centre yesterday, he shared an encounter with a patient during his first month of housemanship.

The patient, an Indian national who has worked for a construction company here for 20 years, had suffered a massive stroke and was partially paralysed.

Dr Neo and his colleagues made many calls and arranged a meeting with the man’s employers to convince them to choose a better, but more expensive, healthcare option for the man’s recovery. In the end, the company agreed to do so.

Said Dr Neo: “We are often caught



up in day-to-day administrative tasks and we may not have time to stop, to think about what else we can do to make the lives of our patients better, unless we make an active effort to do so.”

The experience taught him to “fight for our patients”, he added, addressing around 300 fellow Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery graduates at the commencement ceremony.

Before graduating, Dr Neo, whose parents divorced when he was two, volunteered regularly with NUS Medicine’s Neighbourhood Health Service, which offers health screening to residents of rental flats

throughout Singapore. He told *The Straits Times* before the ceremony that while his family struggled financially, it paled in comparison to what he saw some of the residents go through. His mother had brought him and his two siblings up on her monthly income of \$1,500 as a childcare teacher.

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He told *The Straits Times* before the ceremony that while his family struggled financially, it paled in comparison to what he saw some of the residents go through. His mother had brought him and his two siblings up on her monthly income of \$1,500 as a childcare teacher.

Serving the underprivileged has taught Dr Neo to empathise with patients, especially after realising that this group often have a host of other concerns and, as a result, medical care is sometimes the last thing on their minds.

Also speaking at Sunday’s ceremony was Professor Tan Chorh



Above: Dr Arturo Neo says serving the underprivileged has taught him to empathise with patients.

Left: A graduate taking photographs outside the NUS University Cultural Centre after yesterday’s commencement ceremony. ST PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI

Chuan, chief health scientist at the Ministry of Health and executive director of the ministry’s Office for Healthcare Transformation.

In his speech, Prof Tan reminded the graduates of the “precious gift” of skills and knowledge gained in their five years of medical school.

“They not only allow you to diagnose and heal, but also to serve patients well, be a source of comfort, and to have a positive impact on communities, no matter where they are.”

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