

NUS names new professorship after veteran heart surgeon

He is lauded for bold vision for medicine's future, push for new frontiers in discovery

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In his 50 years of medical service, cardiac surgeon Lee Chuen Neng, 72, has held thousands of hearts in his hands.

Having saved so many lives and mentored thousands of young doctors, the surgeon extraordinaire, fondly known as CN, has a special place in the hearts of many.

To appreciate his bold vision for the future of medicine and celebrate his push for new frontiers in medical discovery, the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS Medicine) launched a new professorship in his honour.

Called the CN Lee Professorship in Medical Sciences, it is the latest in a series of professorships initiated by NUS Medicine to recognise outstanding Singaporeans and train the next generation of leaders in medical sciences.

It promotes partnerships with experts from various disciplines to

address issues such as cancer, tackle emerging healthcare challenges, and spur important discourse to improve the practice of healthcare in Singapore and abroad.

"We are trying not to do just incremental research of little consequence but something that will change the practice of medicine in a big way. To do that, we need to collaborate with other disciplines, such as bioengineering and pharmacology, in areas of diagnoses and therapeutics – something new that will be for the long term," Professor Lee told *The Straits Times*.

Prof Lee is the son of the late politician Lee Khoo Choy, a member of the People's Action Party old guard. He is married to Emeritus Professor Aileen Wee, a liver cytology expert, and has three children and two grandchildren.

The CN Lee Professorship was launched officially on April 5 at The Fullerton Hotel Singapore.

Changing medicine in a big way is a reflection of Prof Lee, who does nothing by halves.

NUS Medicine dean Chong Yap

Seng said Prof Lee "epitomises the essence of surgical excellence and is highly sought after by global health institutions".

"Beyond his mastery of surgery, CN's pioneering research has profoundly impacted patient welfare beyond his direct care. We hope that the recipient of this professorship will be inspired to also strive for the best and break new frontiers in medical sciences," Professor Chong said.

Prof Lee is the Abu Rauff Professor in Surgery at the department of surgery at NUS Medicine and emeritus consultant at the department of cardiac, thoracic and vascular surgery at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore.

He left for private practice in 1992 but returned to public service at NUS and the National University Hospital (NUH) at end-2001.

A leader and surgeon who founded the four sub-speciality divisions of adult cardiac, vascular, thoracic, and congenital heart surgery at NUS Medicine, NUH and the National University Health System (NUHS) in 1985, he established a foundation that paved the way for generations of surgeons in the field, said the university.

In his 10 years as chair of surgery



Professor Lee Chuen Neng "epitomises the essence of surgical excellence and is highly sought after by global health institutions", said the dean of NUS Medicine. Launched in his honour, the CN Lee Professorship in Medical Sciences is the latest professorship initiated by the school to recognise outstanding Singaporeans and train the next generation of leaders in medical sciences. PHOTO: NUS MEDICINE

at NUHS and head of NUS Medicine's department of surgery from 2005 to 2015, Prof Lee established the Advanced Surgery Training Centre, and developed 14 speciality surgery divisions including transplant, gastrointestinal and reconstructive surgery at NUH.

He also spearheaded a training and certification programme for cardiothoracic surgery in Singapore, in collaboration with the College of Surgeons of Hong Kong and the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

For his contributions to education, Prof Lee received the International Medal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 2012 and the National Clinician Mentor Award in 2015 from Singapore's

Ministry of Health.

He is also Courtesy Professor in Engineering at the department of biomedical engineering at the NUS College of Design and Engineering (CDE), and clinical director of the Institute for Health Innovation and Technology (iHealthtech).

His thirst for innovation led him to start NUS iHealthtech and the Engineering in Medicine platform at NUS CDE, where numerous bioengineering programmes, startups and spin-offs were launched.

He also established an NUS Medicine programme focusing on nano-diagnostics and nano-therapeutics, especially for common diseases with poor diagnostic tools and therapy. These include liver disease and Alzheimer's.

To colleague and friend Lim Jui, Prof Lee is "a visionary and tireless champion of innovation".

"He used to say, 'As doctors, all we have is one head, two hands, and 24 hours a day. The only way to break free of this limitation and to make an impact is through invention and innovation.' CN also inspired us with his kind, open and curious mind. He belongs in the pantheon of greats in Singapore medical history," said Dr Lim, chief executive officer of SGInnovate.

Prof Lee said the professorship is "a recognition from the university, supported by my patients and friends and the medical school".

A respected nature photographer who has travelled the globe capturing everything from a group of Kyrgyz people on horseback fighting over a calf carcass to rambunctious walruses, he approaches his hobby with a similar curiosity and thirst for adventure.

And his adventures in the wild have resulted in a "bucketful of memory cards".

"Like most things in life, exploring beneath the surface allows us to see different layers and opens up fascinating features," he said.

The photos are a visual vehicle to impart some life philosophies: to seek out happiness, be curious, take some risks, and learn from poetry, he added.

"The secret to happiness is low expectations," he said. "We aim high, work very hard towards that, but expect to fail. If we do fail, as it is often the case, it is expected. We stay happy."

He added: "As a heart surgeon, I have experienced many moments when life hung on a precarious cliff. These moments I see often when travelling. We ought to treasure life and each precious moment."

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