

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Deputy Editor

Passion for Medicine

– SMA Interviews Ms Bianca Chan Su-Wan,
recipient of the 2007 Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship

A first-year MD student of the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School Singapore (Duke-NUS GMS), Ms Bianca Chan Su-Wan previously studied at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom and was awarded with First Class Honours. She has a keen interest in cancer research and is also passionate about helping underprivileged children. She has volunteered at the Oxford Gatehouse Soup Kitchen for the Homeless, the Sushita Orphanage in Bulgaria as well as at an orthopaedic hospital in Nepal.

Oh Jen Jen: What did you study at Oxford?

Bianca Chan: I did a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in Natural Sciences: Physiological Sciences, majoring in Immunology. It is basically a pre-clinical medical course with an emphasis on independent research.

OJJ: Was there any particular reason you did not pursue medicine initially, but chose another course before opting for the Duke-NUS GMS after graduating?

BC: I have always wanted to be a doctor, and I considered going into medicine straight after junior college.

However, I understood that medicine is a life-long commitment, and that it would be difficult for me to take time off to pursue other interests once I started medical school. I was faced with a dilemma because while I wanted to be a doctor, I also wanted to see the world and experience life overseas.

I did not apply to medical school overseas because I knew that I could not afford to go, and there were no overseas scholarships available for medicine. Taking a government scholarship to do a Science degree overseas would have made it very difficult to go to medical school afterwards because of the six-year bond. Thus it seemed that I had to choose between doing medicine and going overseas.

It was a difficult choice but God provided me with a compromise.

I was very blessed to have been awarded a Jardine Foundation Scholarship to pursue a three-year course in Oxford. The scholarship did not have a bond, so I could still go to medical school after my first degree. At the time, there was also talk that a graduate medical school would be set up in Singapore around the time I graduated. It felt like God had a plan for me all worked out already, so I decided to go to Oxford first, and now here I am at the Duke-NUS GMS.

OJJ: Do you have any research background, for example, during your Oxford days? If yes, what area of research were you involved in?

BC: I have a little bit of research experience, mostly related to cancer. While in junior college, I tried my hand at synthesising potential anti-cancer drugs in the Pharmacy Department of National University of Singapore (NUS). After junior college, I worked on genetic markers for breast cancer at the Oncology Research Institute in NUS under Dr Lau Quek Choon. I did my final



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At Nepal Orthopaedic Hospital



Nepal traditional instruments



At Sushitsa Orphanage, Bulgaria



Party at the orphanage, Bulgaria



Children of Nepal



Whitewater rafting in Nepal

year Honours project in Oxford on phagocytic macrophage receptors, and after I graduated, I did an internship at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) on the development of the mammary gland and its similarities to tumour development.

OJJ: You volunteered at a hospital in Nepal. How long were you there? How would you describe the level of medical care in Nepal compared to a developed country like Singapore?

BC: I volunteered at the Nepal Orthopaedic Hospital for a month, and it was truly an eye-opening experience. I helped to clean and dress wounds, make and remove plaster casts, pull out K-wires and apply simple stitches, and had the chance to observe all kinds of operations from hip replacements to forearm amputations. The hospital is a charitable organisation, and I was amazed at how much they managed to do in spite of their limited resources. They do not even have disposable gloves, alcohol swabs or vacuum-sealed blood collection tubes, and they really have to innovate in the operating theatre to stabilise fractures with the limited equipment that they have. I did not realise just how basic all their equipment was until my recent tour of Singapore General Hospital, when I became acutely aware of how great the disparity was between hospitals in developed and developing countries. However, despite their limited resources, they have made a real difference in the lives of people who would not have otherwise been able to access or afford medical care, and reduced the burden of deformities due to untreated fractures. They have helped the lame to walk again and given numerous accident victims a chance at a normal life and that, to me, is truly inspiring.

OJJ: Have you done volunteer work elsewhere – both in Singapore and abroad? When did you first start volunteering?

BC: I became more involved in voluntary work only after I went overseas because until then, I was too busy with my co-curricular activities in school to be able to do much more than the occasional Community Involvement Project.

During my first Easter holiday, I wanted to travel but also do something more meaningful than simply sightseeing. So I went to Bulgaria with some friends to help out at an orphanage for

two weeks. That first-hand experience of what it is like to live in poverty made me realise how privileged I was and how much I had to give. So I started volunteering at a soup kitchen for the homeless in Oxford. Those weekly sessions really helped me to keep things in perspective when I started to take for granted the blessings that I had been given and complain about the amount of work that I had.

In Singapore, I have volunteered at the Day Care Centre at the Assisi Home and Hospice, tutoring the children in English and Mathematics, and have also been helping out in various projects in church.

OJJ: I understand your interest in cancer research is partly fuelled by your uncle's battle with the disease. What do you hope to achieve in this field – any specific malignancy you would like to target and why?

BC: My ultimate goal is to find a way to harness the power of the immune system and direct it to eradicating cancerous cells, and in doing so develop a cure for cancer that is more affordable, accessible, and less damaging to the body than current cancer therapies. At present, I am still trying to figure out which kind of cancer would be the most suitable for doing research in this area.

OJJ: What interests do you have outside your studies? Any unusual hobbies you would like to share?

BC: I developed a love for travelling while I was overseas, and I particularly enjoy going hiking and admiring the awe-inspiring beauty of God's creation. Some of the highlights of my trips include seeing my first snowfall, skiing in Innsbruck and Vermont, watching the sunrise from the peak of Mount Kinabalu in Sabah, camping amidst the wildlife in Yellowstone National Park, hiking among some of the world's tallest waterfalls in Yosemite National Park, white-water rafting and mountain-biking below the Himalayas in Nepal, walking behind the curtain of a waterfall in Wales, and feeling the mist and power of Niagara Falls.

OJJ: What are your thoughts on the fact that the pioneer batch of Duke-NUS GMS students features a significant majority of females?

BC: I find it extremely encouraging that capable people are being given the opportunity to pursue their dreams and are not being discriminated

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against simply because of their gender. Medicine is still a fairly male-dominated profession, but perhaps with more females accepted into medical school that might change in the future!

OJJ: What advantages and/or disadvantages do you foresee, if at all, as a graduate medical student, compared to the usual 19-year-olds at Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS?

BC: I think the main difference between the students of Duke-NUS GMS and Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS, is our age. Being older certainly has its challenges because of how long the training process is and because we are starting school again at a time when our peers are drawing a stable income and are starting to settle down. However, a big advantage of starting medicine later is that we have had more time to

seriously consider whether being a doctor is truly our calling. When I hear the stories of what my classmates had to sacrifice in order to pursue a medical degree here at Duke-NUS GMS – giving up jobs, taking out loans, moving families across the world – I cannot help but feel inspired by how mature and committed everyone is.

The diversity in our class is also amazing. People come from different countries and have studied at different universities. Some have backgrounds in engineering, others have PhDs, some are married and one even has a kid! Many of us have also had a chance to explore and develop a special interest in research. The learning environment in school is so vibrant partly because each person contributes such a unique perspective to the class.

OJJ: Thank you for your time. ■