

The Way of the Sword

Tan Zehao has just started his first year at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. An avid practitioner of the Japanese martial art kendo, he shares the principles of the *katana*, the sword used in kendo, with *SMA News*.

I have a Bachelor of Engineering from the National University of Singapore (NUS), but decided to pursue Medicine because... I like the way Medicine involves the application of science and technology in helping people. Since young I have always had a strong interest in science and technology and through the exposure of community service activities, I also developed a passion for helping people. The combination of both actually led me to do Bioengineering for my undergraduate studies, as I wanted a hand in the development of technologies that can have an impact in the delivery of healthcare, which helps in the relief of suffering patients.

It was during my participation in research in my undergraduate years when I realised that I wanted to play a more direct role in the delivery of healthcare, hence the choice to pursue a graduate degree in Medicine. The MD programme at Duke-NUS is perfect as it allows me to pursue a career in Medicine, and leaves future possibilities to continue and improve my participation in the development of healthcare technologies through the research year, which is one of the programme's strong points.

My years at NUS will enrich my journey forward at Duke-NUS by... equipping me with the skills to become a well-rounded learner. It has taught me to not neglect other aspects of personal development aside from studying. During my undergraduate course in NUS, I was given ample opportunities to pursue my extracurricular interests. Example of these include community service, research and an exchange programme to Kyoto University in Japan. Through these activities, I have picked up valuable communication and leadership skills. I believe these skills will help directly in aspects of my education at Duke-NUS such as patient communication and team based learning. My time spent as an undergraduate at NUS will also serve as a reminder to not only focus on my grades in medical school, but also to work on other aspects of development despite the hectic pace of the curriculum.



Zehao in his kendo robes

The first few days at Duke-NUS have been... an enriching experience! The diversity of the class is amazing, comprising individuals from a great number of countries with a myriad of backgrounds. Some of us have trained in business administration and consulting while others have spent time doing great research in some of the top universities around the world. I had a great time making friends in class, learning more about each of their unique backgrounds, and how that played a part in influencing them towards a career in Medicine.

I am deeply interested in kendo, and was hooked... after watching a training session at a NUS Kendo Club welcome tea. The strong spirit exhibited by the *kendokas* (kendo practitioners) at the session, and the discipline and etiquette they displayed gave me the impression that it is a formidable form of martial arts which could make me a stronger person both physically and mentally. Further participation in kendo allowed me to gain greater understanding that kendo not only serves as a form of physical education, it also fosters many positive values in life. To quote the All Japan Kendo Federation: "Kendo is a way to

discipline the human character through application of the principles of the *katana*."

Another aspect of kendo that I find intriguing is its cultural and historical roots. Through conversations with my kendo teacher and personal research, I gained a greater understanding of how kendo is derived from traditional Japanese swordsmanship. This gave me a better appreciation on the character building aspects of kendo. The tenacity and mental fortitude that I gained from practising kendo has really helped me pull through tough times when school and research work were demanding. I believe that these values will continue to benefit me as I train as a medical student at Duke-NUS.

The best experience I've had in kendo so far was... the honour of representing Singapore at the 9th ASEAN Kendo Tournament last year. As a team we went through gruelling training in preparation for the tournament and through this, I have built camaraderie with my fellow team members that I will treasure for life. Learning how to prepare for the tournament in terms of managing anxieties and keeping myself in top condition for the actual matches has also been a great experience which will serve to benefit me in many other aspects of my life. It was also an eye opener to see the skills of other kendokas in the region. The friendships built from the celebrations after pitting ourselves against each other really exemplifies the kendo teaching of "交剣知愛" (building friendship through crossing swords).

My role models are... Eiga Naoki and Henry Smalls for kendo, and Dr Edward Trudeau for Medicine.

My kendo teacher introduced me to a kendo documentary made by the Japanese national public broadcasting organisation NHK, titled *A Single Blow*. The documentary described Eiga Naoki-sensei's journey in kendo, which culminated in the Japanese team's victory at the 12th World Kendo Championships in Glasgow in 2003, an important milestone in his kendo career. The effort and training he put into kendo as a professional *kendoka* has immensely inspired me to put in my greatest effort in all my endeavours. Henry Smalls-sensei pursued a meaningful career in the tough and competitive martial art of kendo despite having lost both legs in an accident at a young age. His attitude of not giving up no matter how tough the odds has served as a very important lesson for me in life.

I first came across Dr Edward Trudeau when I read a meaningful quote he once said about Medicine: "To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always". Through personal research I chanced upon several descriptions of Dr Trudeau's efforts in finding a cure for tuberculosis. He was also known to provide tuberculosis treatment to the poor. His legacy in research lives on today in the form of the Trudeau Institute in America. Personally, his drive towards research and caring for the underprivileged is something I hope to emulate in my future career in Medicine. **SMA**

Zehao (right) having a friendly spar at an NUS Kendo Club welcome tea



A fun moment during orientation - Zehao (wearing mask) with his Duke-NUS classmates

(Photo: Duke-NUS)

