

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

T * SINGAPORE'S GOT TALENT

On 19 June 2007, a disgruntled medical student from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore (NUS), contacted the SMA to express his deep displeasure that two students from Ngee Ann Polytechnic had been accepted to this most august of medical schools. His argument was that polytechnic students did not go through the same rigorous education in the hard sciences demanded of GCE 'A' Level students that would more ideally qualify a person to enter medical school.

Furthermore, entry into medical school was so ferociously competitive that this precedent and new equation just made life much harder for very bright junior college medical student wannabes and their now fibrillating parents.

Why were the current medical students not consulted on this policy change, he asked?

I comment with some objectivity here as I neither sat for the GCE 'A' Level examinations nor was I a polytechnic student. Instead I obtained the then risky, obscure and unfashionable International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma on scholarship at Pearson College in the 1980s, in a clime when the GCE 'A' Levels ruled the waves in the Commonwealth. And the IB programme was fabulous, as it was conducted in a Utopian environment that fostered learning and decried elitism and competition.

Post-IB, I figured that competing for a place

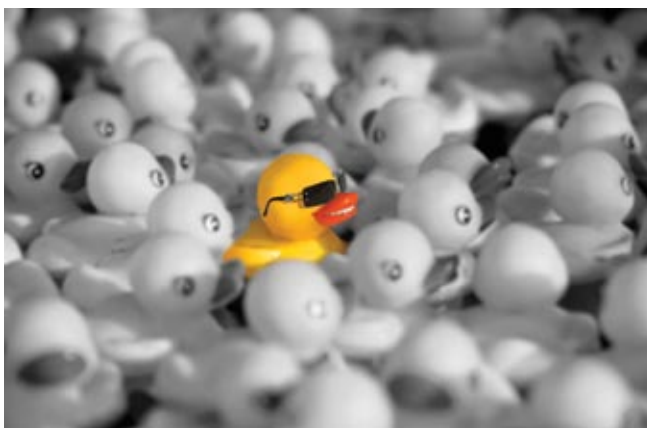
at the NUS medical school with all these turbo-charged brainy over-achieving teenage mutant ninjas – many of whom are good friends of mine to this day – was an uphill task, especially when the then Ministry of Defence even refused to allow me to disrupt for medical school overseas because I was only a diploma holder – a situation resolved through a letter from my Canadian headmaster at Pearson.

I feel that the decision by the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine to accept these two bright

polytechnic students into medical school is a move in the right direction. I am not party to their CVs, but it is likely that they had demonstrated a hunger to succeed, exemplary grades, innovative thinking, a strong background in R & D and arguably more

practical experience in biotechnology research than the average GCE 'A' Level student. The difficulty then is that, thanks to this invasion of poly pollyannas (actually the current poly representation is less than 1% of the incoming medical school year), even more strong candidates from the junior colleges will be out-ed and left sobbing by the wayside when news of medical school rejection arrives.

So how do you determine that someone is going to make a good doctor in a selection criteria that may have some subjectivity endemic to any medical school application system? Locally, it does not help when everyone seems



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to have perfect GCE 'A' Level scores these days, not to mention being wushu and swimming champions, concert pianists and world record-holders for short text messaging. Ironically, the only person from my pre-IB junior college class who got turned down by the NUS medical school ended up making loads more money by her late thirties than any of the doctors from that same class when she became an equity partner in a prestigious local law firm. Conversely, a top junior college student and student leader who made it to the local medical school could not pass any of her First Year re-sit examinations and I advised her to leave the medical school. She had since obtained an MBA from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is now in High Finance.

The Big Kahuna of NUS, Vice Chancellor Shih Choon Fong, started life with an engineering diploma from the Singapore Polytechnic. Dr Harold Varmus, Nobel Prize laureate in Physiology or Medicine, former Director of the National Institute of Health in the United States and currently President of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, began life in a liberal

arts college excelling in Elizabethan poetry and then won a scholarship to Harvard to read English literature. He became a doctor later in life.

In the British medical school that I attended, there was a staff nurse and a dentist, both good and diligent medical students. Their maturity, prior on-the-job experience and lack of youthful flippancy set them apart from the rest of us. It will be interesting to see how the pioneer cohort of medical students arriving at the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School will turn out in a curriculum adapted to rise to challenges of a rapidly evolving global healthcare and biomedical landscape.

Recently, on YouTube, I saw a shy and awkward Welsh cell-phone salesman, Paul Potts, who looked a trifle syndromic, audition for the TV show *Britain's Got Talent*. He performed the opera favourite, *Nessun Dorma*. I have never seen Simon Cowell so moved. And the audience was rapturous. Paul Potts, the underdog, had been given this special opportunity to shine and he certainly did. So too in Singapore, the Everyman must feel that he or she has more opportunities to shine. ■