

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Deputy Editor



Tribune photo shot by Pamela Woo, Ngee Ann Polytechnic

## The Road Less Travelled

– Interview with aspiring doctors Mr Ron Ng and Mr Soong Jun Wei

Out of the 32 applications received from polytechnic students this year, two were selected by the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS, for admission under a new discretionary admissions initiative – Exceptional Individual Scheme (EIS). **Mr Ron Ng** and **Mr Soong Junwei** will join about 200 other aspiring doctors as they begin medical school in 2009. Like all other applicants, they had to take an essay test and go through two rounds of interviews. While the Junior College (JC) students were only assessed on their 'A' Level results, polytechnic students were assessed both on their polytechnic and 'O' Level results.

Both Mr Ng and Mr Soong graduated from Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School of Life Sciences and Chemical Technology (LSCT) with a Diploma in Biomedical Laboratory Technology and a Diploma in Biotechnology respectively. Both were also the Silver Medallists in their own fields.

Mr Ng has received various awards, a few of which are the Bayer Prize for Outstanding Performance in Clinical Haematology, National Cancer Centre Prize for Outstanding Performance in Clinical Microbiology, and Singapore Association of Clinical Biochemist in Clinical Chemistry. He was also President of the LSCT Management Committee and was active in the Ngee Ann Lifeguard Corps.

In addition to academic pursuits, Mr Soong competed in dragon-boating and has bagged his fair share of awards. These include the Gold Medal for the IVP Men Event in the 1<sup>st</sup> Polytechnic Invitational Dragon Boat Race 2005 and the Half Colours Award for Dragon Boat (Men – Under 20) in Ngee Ann Polytechnic Student Excellence Award 2006, just to name a few.

SMA News Deputy Editor Dr Oh Jen Jen speaks to them about admission to medical school and what they would like to achieve in future.

**Oh Jen Jen:** How does it feel to be trailblazers in the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's discretionary admissions initiative?

**Soong Junwei:** It was really a surprise, as I understand the chance of getting in via EIS is extremely slim. I definitely feel honoured to be one of the pioneers and hope that more of my graduating counterparts will be accepted in the future.

**Ron Ng:** It certainly gives me great honour and pride to be one of the trailblazers. It is really a dream come true for me.

**OJJ:** There were 32 polytechnic applicants in total. How do you think you stood out from the rest?

**SJW:** The selection is based on our academic results, CCAs (Co-Curricular Activities), interviews and essays. However, I feel that my internship at the Institute of Molecular Cell Biology (IMCB) helped to give me a competitive edge as I was trained extensively in the area of research.

**RN:** I believe it was more than just one factor that decided it all. Firstly, the polytechnic studies that I pursued under the direction of the National University Hospital's Department of Laboratory Medicine has certainly given me an edge over the rest of the students, as it provided earlier



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exposure to clinical work and better understanding of the healthcare industry. Secondly, the soft skills inculcated through numerous presentations and talks helped build up self-confidence and public speaking skills, and I believe this also helped us stand out from the rest.

**OJJ:** Based on your 'O' Level results, both of you qualified for good junior colleges but opted for the polytechnic instead, before choosing medicine years later. Any specific reasons why you did not take the more direct route?

**SJW:** I took only double pure sciences (Physics and Chemistry) for my 'O' Level examinations. I had no prior exposure to Biology but was really keen to understand the structure of the human body. I was intrigued by how cells evolve into tissues, tissues into organs, organs into organ systems and finally, into an entire human being. Hence, I chose to study Biotechnology at the polytechnic instead of Biology in JC, which I believed would be more advanced and difficult for a novice like me to catch up with.

**RN:** I chose the polytechnic route because I wanted to specialise in a particular field at an early stage. The life sciences sector has always intrigued me, particularly the area of human diseases. In addition, the challenge of pursuing medicine through a polytechnic route motivated me to do well and prove that a polytechnic education is equivalent to a junior college's. Finally, the polytechnic route prepares students better for the workforce, and allows much earlier exposure to the working environment, which will certainly aid us in our future careers.

**OJJ:** What made you eventually decide on medicine as your future career?

**SJW:** I enjoy interacting with and helping people. Moreover, I am fascinated by the wonders of the human body and how the molecules co-exist and interact in order to support life. Choosing Medicine as a career will certainly enable me to achieve my aspirations. It was the encouragement from Dr Wayne Lee Forday, Deputy Director of LSCT, that motivated me to apply for medical school.

**RN:** My passion to help others who are in need and my strong interest in Science, particularly Biology, are two of the most important factors in my decision to pursue medicine as a future career.

**OJJ:** What advantages and disadvantages do you foresee, considering your educational background differs from the conventional norm for NUS medicine?

**SJW:** The advantage would be that we can better adapt to the university style of curriculum as the programme we have in the polytechnic is quite similar. However, the intensive theoretical nature of the course may be a hurdle for us as we are more inclined towards practical work.

**RN:** The possible advantages are: (1) we are equipped with basic knowledge for studies in medicine, so I think we will be able to adapt better to the curriculum, and (2) I believe the polytechnic's lecture-tutorial-practical teaching format is fairly similar to the university's system, and so in terms of learning cultures, we should fit in easily.

One possible disadvantage is we may need to brush up on our thinking skills because, unlike our JC compatriots, we lack exposure in subjects such as Project Work, which help enhance this ability.

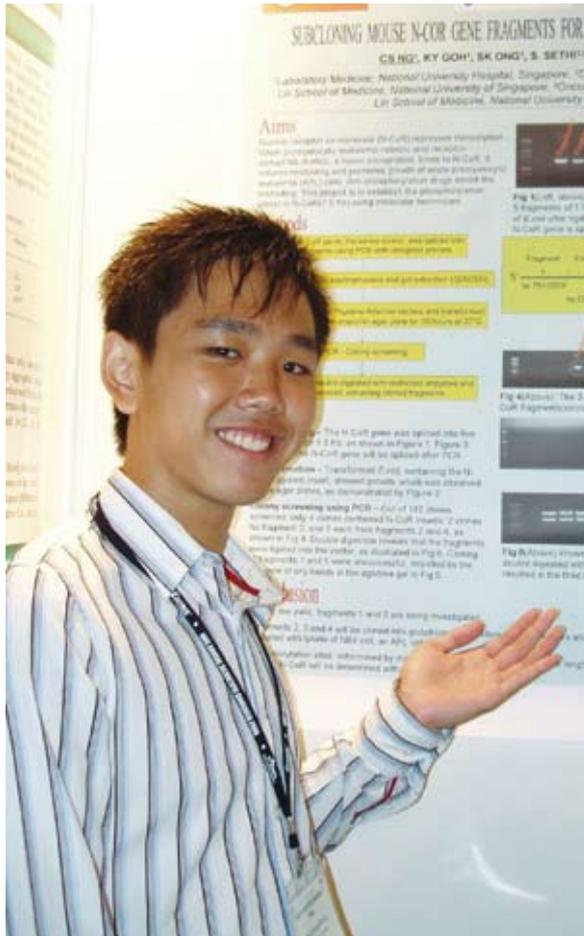
**OJJ:** How do you think you will fit in, both academically and socially?

**SJW:** I believe my outgoing personality will aid me in interacting and blending in with my peers despite the differences in our backgrounds. Academic-wise, I will need to work doubly hard to catch up on the theoretical aspect of the course.

**RN:** I believe I will be able to fit in well with my classmates and that we will be able to exchange pointers freely despite our different educational backgrounds. Academically, as medical school is pretty much a fresh start for all students, I think I will fit in as well as my classmates, since we will all be facing new challenges in our studies and pursuing new knowledge.

**OJJ:** The SMA received feedback from a medical student who expressed concern that admitting polytechnic graduates would compromise the status of the medicine course and perhaps even "cheapen" the medical profession. Your response to that statement?

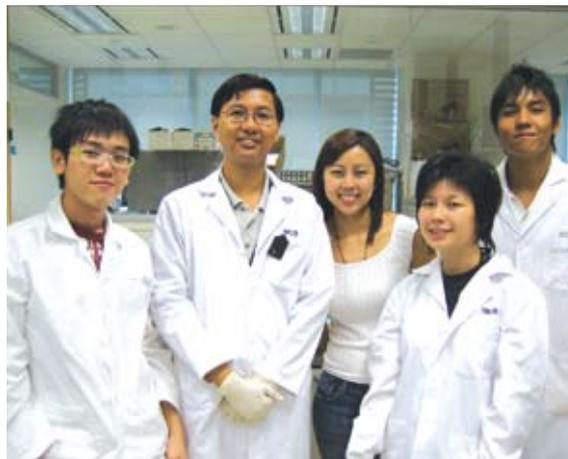
**SJW:** The medical profession should be diversified and not confined to entry for JC students only. The competence and quality of polytechnic graduates is comparable to JC students, so we should not be deemed less capable or considered a liability to the



Mr Ron Ng



Mr Soong Junwei with his family (top) and his classmates (above).



medical profession. In fact, there are polytechnic graduates studying in overseas medical schools and so far, there have been no problems with regards to the standard of medical care delivered by them.

Graduates from these two different institutions are special in their own ways. Polytechnic students have more hands-on experience while JC graduates are stronger in their theoretical knowledge. Hence, I think both cohorts should do equally well as long as they work on the areas they feel they are less adept in.

**RN:** That was the student's personal opinion, and I respect his views as I understand the concerns and interests raised. However, I would like to assure the student that polytechnic graduates are not that different from our fellow JC friends, and that we are all working towards a common goal of rendering our help as professional healthcare workers to those who need it most. As long as we never lose sight of this, I feel that the integrity of

the medical profession will be upheld and that it will remain as noble and respectable a profession as it already is.

**OJJ:** Do you think patients will be supportive of this new admission policy?

**SJW:** I believe some might be skeptical. However, they should be assured that we will undergo the same training and courses, and thus will have fulfilled all the necessary requirements when we qualify as doctors.

**RN:** In a society as technologically advanced as ours, we should all learn to adapt to new changes, as change is the only constant in life. Patients' concerns include: (1) making sure they do not have any illness plaguing them, and (2) if they do indeed fall ill, there are competent healthcare workers doing their utmost to help them recover. I feel that patients will be supportive of this new initiative, as it signifies the injection of a new driving force into the medical profession.

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**OJJ:** Junwei, I understand you hope to specialise in Orthopaedics in future. What about you, Ron? Can you elaborate further on your choices?

**RN:** I would like to pursue a career in Emergency Medicine, but I also want to keep my options open as I have not been exposed to clinical work in the other disciplines yet.

I am interested in Emergency Medicine because working in the emergency department is thrilling and exciting, and the need to think critically and act fast pushes me to do my best for those in need.

**OJJ:** Any areas of medical research you would like to be involved with?

**SJW:** My internship in the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology has spurred my interest in bone development. Hence, I would like to be involved in bone-related research.

**RN:** I would like to be involved in the area of infectious diseases research, as this is a growing field of study considering the many new bugs that are causing new diseases and epidemics around the globe.

**OJJ:** What contributions do you hope to make to the medical profession?

**SJW:** I hope to contribute to the research of terminal diseases to find cures, and also battle against epidemics.

**RN:** I hope that I will be able to do my utmost to uphold the name of medicine as an honourable profession, and also do my best for patients who need help when I become a medical doctor. I also hope that my work in the relevant research areas (if I am involved in any) will bring about better treatment or procedures that will benefit our people.

**OJJ:** And finally, what advice do you have for other polytechnic graduates who aspire to be doctors?

**SJW:** Believe in yourself and stay focused in what you do.

**RN:** Do not be afraid to pursue your dreams, because you do not know when opportunity will come knocking on your door. Keep aspiring to do better and realise your dreams. Have confidence in the path you have chosen, and make the best of the education that you have. Work hard and good luck! ■