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Interview with Prof John Wong

NATIONAL MEDICAL EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNER 2009 (PART 2)

An inspiring mentor and passionate champion for research, Prof John Wong was awarded the National Outstanding Clinician Award in July 2009, in recognition of his contributions to medicine and clinical research. Prof Wong is a medical oncologist-haematologist, Dean of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and Director of the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore. He is also Deputy Chief Executive, National University Health System. *SMA News* is honoured to be able to ask him a few questions.

1. Can you tell us about your formative years as a young doctor?

Those were some of the best years of my life. I went to work every day excited about what lay ahead. I felt that all my years of training were worth it when I could contribute to a patient's recovery or at least ease the patient's symptoms. I was, and still am, fascinated by how much I don't know. I used to spend a lot of time in the library, and now I spend time on the computer searching for information to help me help patients better.

2. Who were some of the mentors who have inspired you?

There have been so many along the way. People who inspired me by their sheer love of their subject include Emeritus Professor Ragunathar Kanagasuntheram, Professor Yeoh Teow Seng, Professor Seah Cheng Siang, Emeritus Professor K Shanmugaratnam, Emeritus Professor Wong Hock Boon, University Professor Lim Pin, Professor Chan Heng Leong, Professor Tan Cheng Lim, and Emeritus Professor Chia Boon Lock. Emeritus Professor Shanmugaratnam continues to inspire me – he is 88 years old, as

knowledgeable as ever, is still working and providing second opinions on the most complex cases. He is a real doctor's doctor.

People who had a direct impact on me include my tutors – Drs Lim Kian Peng, Gwee Hak Meng, and Kueh Yan Koon – and my immediate supervisors when I started work – Drs Koo Chee Chong, Tham Siew Nee, and Maurice Choo. Several people at Weill Cornell Medical College and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center also played a major role in my life, including Drs Ralph Nachman, Anne Moore, Joseph Ruggiero, Roy Silverstein, Adam Asch, Peter Yi, Shahin Rafii, Daniel Riew, Alberto Acosta, Barry Hartman, John Mendelsohn and George Bosl. I feel grateful and fortunate to have been able to work with and learn from these people, and many more.

3. What influence did your father have on you on becoming a doctor, an oncologist, and an administrator? How do you fulfill all three roles?

My parents have had a very strong yet subtle influence on how I've lived my life. They never asked me to become

FEATURE



a doctor. On the contrary, they went to great lengths to show me just how demanding the profession is. Yet I could see that there was a certain satisfaction in what they did, and I could also see that medicine offered everything I wanted in a profession: intellectual stimulation, a chance to do good for society, and a means to offer my family a certain degree of security. The choice of internal medicine and medical oncology were my own. I wanted to specialise in a

is in developing better, more effective, yet accessible and affordable care for patients who are so unfortunate as to develop diseases. Cancer care has greatly improved since I first started in 1988, but the challenges remain daunting. People still smoke, live lifestyles that increase their risk, or decline their mammograms, colonoscopies, and Pap smears. For those who are diagnosed with cancer, the cost of many new drugs is phenomenal. There is a great deal of work that still needs to be done in Singapore.

having been able to spend more time with my family.

6. What has brought you the most satisfaction in your professional journey?

Seeing patients get better; seeing many of my younger colleagues become better doctors, teachers, researchers and leaders than I could ever hope to be; seeing nurses, pharmacists, and allied health professionals gain the respect and recognition for the invaluable work that they do.

7. How do you think Singapore can keep its lead as a hub for excellent medical services and training?

First by recognising that we don't have any lead. There are places in the region that can do what we do with results that are as good if not better, and at less cost. The day we think we have "arrived" is the day that we start declining. Yes, we do have a good healthcare service with a few peaks. Is our training good? We can call it good only if our students are better than we are. Is our medical service excellent? We can say it is excellent only if we can prevent disease from occurring, and for those who are unfortunate as to develop disease, to make sure that healthcare is effective, affordable, accessible, and safe every time we deliver it.

8. Do you have any thoughts on the third medical school not under NUS? Will this have any impact on the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM) students?

This proposal is under active consideration and deliberation by many capable people.

9. Can you comment on the blogs highlighting the tensions between the YLLSoM and Duke-NUS students, as well as your thoughts on the proposed residency programme?

It would be most unfortunate if there is unhappiness between students of



Photo courtesy of National University Health System

ADVICE TO YOUNG DOCTORS:

Welcome to one of the world's most respected professions. This respect must be constantly earned and can be lost very quickly. We are here to help others and not ourselves. Do great things, but remember you are here because someone took the time and effort to share their knowledge and skills with you. You too must pass your knowledge and skills on to the next generation. If we have done our job, you will be better than we are, and you too must ensure that the generation after you

surpasses you. Only by doing so can we ensure that the medical profession is on an upward trajectory.

field that was systemic, not defined by anatomy or function, where I would be involved in direct patient care, and would constantly expose me to the incredible science that drives cancer biology. I continue to see patients, as that is why I went to medical school, and where I am reminded that there is so much that we don't know and need to learn. I was never trained as a medical administrator. I see this role as a term-limited, institutional national service, which I hope to pass on to more capable colleagues.

4. What is your passion today most centred on, and why?

Preventing disease is the only way we will really be able to cure it. My passion

5. Can you share with us some memorable moments from your medical career? Do you have any regrets?

There have been many memorable events and I hope there will be many more: Attending the wedding of one of my former patients, who almost died when she was in Secondary Four. Receiving a picture of a baby from a proud new mother – another former patient who almost died from lymphoma six years ago. Seeing patients go home after surviving severe infections. Receiving a hand-made sweater for my daughter from the wife of one of my elderly patients with terminal leukemia, who lived by the park where my daughter used to play. I often wish that I could have done more for my patients. My chief regret is not

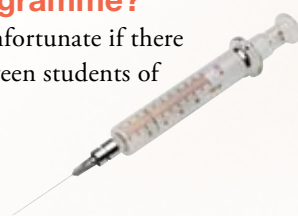




Photo courtesy of National University Health System

Prof John Wong with Minister for Health Khaw Boon Wan, Sivashankar Subramaniam, former Medical Society President, and Liang Hanlong, Project Director, Public Health Screening 2009 Committee.

both medical schools. Both are funded from the public purse, and both exist to serve Singapore and the community we live in. There is so much to do and so much to learn. If students from either school think that whether they will be great doctors is determined by what happened in medical school, they will be sadly disappointed. I know some very average doctors who come from very famous medical schools, and I know some great doctors who have come from medical schools you may not have heard of. At the end of the day, it's how hungry we are, what we make of life and opportunities, and how we play the cards we are dealt. Destiny is made, not ordained.

The proposed residency programme is a major step forward in enhancing medical education in Singapore. We should approach postgraduate education with the same rigour that we do undergraduate education, with a structured curriculum, graded competencies, formative and summative assessments, and institutional responsibility.

10. Can you share some advice on balancing career with a social life and family?

It is challenging but I have a very understanding spouse, children, and a circle of friends who remind me not to take myself too seriously. It has been said many times before, but it's true that no one says on their deathbed that they should have spent more time in the office.

11. What would you advise younger doctors who would like to follow in your footsteps?

Welcome to one of the world's most respected professions. This respect must be constantly earned and can be lost very quickly. We are here to help others and not ourselves. Do great things, but remember you are here because someone took the time and effort to share their knowledge and skills with you. You too must pass your knowledge and skills on to the next generation. If we have done our job, you will be better than we are, and

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you too must ensure that the subsequent generation surpasses you. Only by doing so can we ensure that the medical profession is on an upward trajectory. 