



A clinician, administrator, educator and researcher rolled into one
Photo: Wang Kangyan, Duke-NUS

Educating Minds

Dr Swapna Verma is the Chief of the Early Psychosis Intervention Department and a consultant at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH). She is also an associate professor at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and Psychiatry clerkship coordinator at the IMH.

Dr Verma received the Duke-NUS and SingHealth Outstanding Educator Award in 2009 and 2011. This award is presented annually to the Duke-NUS faculty member who has made the most significant contributions towards the teaching and mentoring of students. Recently, Dr Verma also received the Duke-NUS Pioneer Award – Clinical Science Education (Psychiatry). The one-time Pioneer Award honours the dedicated faculty who bravely stepped into the unknown to help set up the first two years of the Duke-NUS basic science and clinical educational experiences for the pioneer Duke-NUS class which had matriculated in 2007.

SMA News congratulates Dr Verma and speaks to her to find out more about Psychiatry at Duke-NUS.

SMA: What's in store for students as they enter clinical rotations in their second year?

Dr Swapna Verma – SV: They will get a taste of real-world Medicine which is quite different from what they have been reading and practicing in the first year. When they enter the wards, they will realise that it is not just a two-dimensional relationship between the doctor and his patient; it is a complex system where teamwork and communication is crucial. Hence they have to quickly learn the different roles of each team member, understand team dynamics and find their place in the team. Although it is a steep learning curve, the TeamLEAD sessions that they had in the first year will have equipped them with some of the skills required for working within a team. Of course, all the clerkship coordinators are cognizant of this fact and will help the students settle in gently.

SMA: As an associate professor at Duke-NUS and Psychiatry clerkship coordinator at IMH, what is a typical day like?

SV: I wear many hats and spend my day juggling the roles of a clinician, administrator, educator and researcher. I also try to maintain work-life balance: I try to be back at home in time to help my children with their homework and enjoy relaxing moments with my family and friends.

SMA: Some rotations are considered “sexier” than others. How can we emphasise the importance of Psychiatry in medical training, and what are some of the attributes you are looking for in those seeking to specialise in this area?

SV: I do know that Psychiatry is not considered as exciting as perhaps Surgery or Emergency Medicine. In fact, till this day, many people are not aware that as psychiatrists we have gone through medical school as well! But as I tell the students, the skills that we teach in Psychiatry will be useful to them in whichever area they choose to specialise in. We teach them to use the “biopsychosocial” model of care. In

simpler words, we can't just treat the disease alone, without understanding and addressing the needs of the patient. Hence, those who want to specialise in Psychiatry should have two important attributes: they have to be good listeners and be curious about what's going on in their patients' minds.

SMA: Being a psychiatrist, do you feel that your training has equipped you with certain skill sets that allow you to function as a better mentor?

SV: Oh, I would like to think so. I am a good and patient listener, and first try to have a better understanding of the students and their goals, their strengths and areas that they feel

and hence I always remain open to feedback and suggestions for improvement.

But so far, the students have performed well during the rotation, and most importantly, they have all enjoyed the rotation and have a better appreciation of Psychiatry. Some of the students have told me that they really got to talk to their patients during this rotation. I was very happy when two students from the first batch (Tina Tan and Cecilia Kwok) applied for residency in Psychiatry and both were accepted. So I now have the pleasure of teaching them during their residency and watching them grow into budding psychiatrists. I would love to see more students from the subsequent batches apply for Psychiatry and will do my best to

“Being the first ever Duke-NUS student to receive the IMH book prize in Psychiatry is a tremendous honour. My tutors at SGH and IMH were generous with their time in teaching me and exploring career and research options with me, and I am grateful for that. I enjoyed working with Dr Swapna and her team at IMH and look forward to many more enriching experiences to come during residency.”

Tina Tan, student from the Duke-NUS pioneer class

they need to work on. I try not to jump in too quickly and give them advice. Most of the time, the students know what they need to do, so I help by pointing them in the right direction.

SMA: What are some of your most memorable experiences as a mentor, and what has been most rewarding on your journey?

SV: It has been a very rewarding experience, especially since I have been involved right from the very first batch of Duke-NUS students. It has been a learning process for all of us as well, since we were trying out a new curriculum and were not sure about how well it would be received by the students and faculty. I still don't think it is a perfect system

encourage them. In fact, IMH has sponsored a book prize for the best performing student in Psychiatry and the inaugural prize was given to Tina Tan.

SMA: Do you have any advice for the new batch of students (Class of 2014) entering their clerkship rotation next year?

SV: Well, I would like to tell them: “Enter the clerkships with an open mind. There is a lot of learning that takes place outside of formal tutorials and didactics, and you can learn not just from the clinicians but also from different members of the multi-disciplinary team. In fact, every patient encounter is an opportunity to improve.” **SMA**