

Defying stereotypes: An interview with Dr. Tan Lai Yong



Dr. Tan with villagers in Miao Village, Yunan, China

Medicine was never an option when Dr. Tan was in school. He studied at Siglap Secondary School and Temasek Junior College. He struggled academically, and as such did not follow the typical path that many of his medical school peers took to entering medical school.

"I am one of those who didn't do well in school. I did not even know what a university was. On the day my A-level results came out I thought I had failed."

All that changed when he received surprisingly good results. It is no exaggeration to say that these results changed his life. Suddenly the soon-to-be-infantry-foot-soldier had another choice available to him: that of going to medical school. Thanks to his platoon mate's nudging, he applied to NUS medical school.

"I applied to medical school because my platoon mate Tan Mann Hong encouraged me to. Prior to receiving my A-level results, I had signed-up to be an infantry foot soldier in the army. I didn't know what to do in life. By then I knew that I didn't want to go and work. The army offered me a shelter where I don't have to think. Medical school was another five years where I don't have to think. Just go to school and be a student."

Dr. Tan was also different to many of his medical school peers in one other respect. In medical school Dr. Tan observed that some of the students were there because their parents pressured them to be. Although he was influenced to apply by his friend, the decision made to attend medical school was his own.

"I remember talking to my mother after applying to medical school and getting the letter of acceptance. My mother had no schooling to speak of and could barely read. She was washing clothes on a wooden scrub board when I told her: 'Hey Mum. I got into medical school!'

She stopped scrubbing the clothes and sighed, saying [in Cantonese]: "medical school is so tough, are you sure you want to do this? You know I don't need this face. You are my son and you are always my son. I don't need to go to the market to tell people my son is a doctor. You do what you think you can do and do what you enjoy. If you think you can go and study something else that is easier, so be it."

My dad was a pirate taxi driver i.e., an illegal taxi driver. He told me to write to the government for a scholarship or bursary. Thankfully I received a PSC bursary, which I am really grateful for. Because I never prepared to go to university, my CCA was undocumented and so I had no portfolio to yell about. I participated in many sports and clubs at school but it was really participation for the fun of it. If there was no bursary money, I wouldn't have been able to study."

Looking back on his medical education, Dr. Tan noted that he enjoyed medical school so much that he would be willing to attend medical school all over again, if asked. Dr. Tan also has no regrets in his decision to study medicine.

"Going to medical school and getting an education of any kind is God's gift. It is a privilege," explained Dr. Tan.

Thus, Dr. Tan's entry into medical school was quite serendipitous. For those that believe that the best predictor of future behaviour is the past, it would come as no surprise that Dr. Tan would make a different choice compared to his peers when deciding his National Service (NS) placement – choosing community service at an overseas training camp over a prestigious posting with the Republic of Singapore's Air Force...



Dr. Tan with clinic patients, Yunnan, China



Clinic patients, Yunnan, China

As a medical doctor, Dr. Tan was selected to attend the aviation medicine course in the Republic of Singapore's Air Force, a highly coveted posting in which only seven doctors were admitted that year. Dr. Tan however, felt that he wanted to spend his time in NS doing something more in-line with his long-term interests, which was to work with rural communities, and therefore opted to work at an overseas training camp. He explained how his boss Colonel Peng, the Chief Air Force Medical Officer at the time, responded when he requested for a transfer. "He looked at me and said, 'Are you serious? MOs are trying to get into the Air Force and you want out?'" However, Dr. Tan got his transfer. Colonel Peng "reluctantly, but happily signed my form when he understood my motivation for wanting to work in a Spartan clinical setting," noted Dr. Tan.

The one year stint at the overseas training camp turned out to be one of the highlights of Dr. Tan's life.

"It solidified my idea that it is really meaningful to be a doctor among a rural poor community. It's a privilege. I had the unique experience of chlorinating water for drinking, doing blood smears to detect malaria, caring for nearby farmers who were bitten by snakes ..."

Dr. Tan also chose to forego a prestigious trainee rotation in a major hospital for a rotation in the Singapore Prison. In 1996, he left Singapore for Yunnan, China with his wife and young daughter. He went on to develop a wide-range of measures that strengthened the health system and community-based services in Yunnan. He stayed in Yunnan for fourteen years, in Xishuangbanna for four years then in Kunming...

"The prison provided very good training. In prison you could not refer patients out easily; you had to sit down and solve the problem [yourself]"

Clinical Professor Chee Yam Cheng, NHG's CEO, then Director of Medical Manpower at Ministry of Health, provided Dr. Tan with some advice during his Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS) training. At that time, Dr. Tan wanted out of his anaesthesiology traineeship. He was just getting married and wanted more work-life balance. A traineeship (i.e., residency) would have also meant another five year bond for Dr. Tan, something he was quite reluctant to take on.

"I was already bonded eight years under the PSC. I don't begrudge the eight years [because I could not have the resources to study if not for the scholarship], but another five years? I would never have left Singapore to get to work in a cross cultural setting."

So during his ACLS training, he had a chat with Prof Chee about his predicament. Prof Chee said with a tinge of humour that apart from busy hospital postings, there was a vacancy in the Prison Medical Service. Dr. Tan said he would go there.

"Actually, the prison provided very good training," confessed Dr. Tan, "In prison you could not refer patients out easily; you had to sit down and solve the problem [yourself]. That's good all round medical training."

After fulfilling the terms of the PSC bond, Dr. Tan and his family left for Yunnan.

"Going to work in a community development project was a dream come true. But the few years before going was tough on my ego. Five to seven years post-MBBS, classmates were getting their FRCS, and when you go to weddings and class dinners, some people will tell you: "I am now a surgeon," perhaps implying he or she can accept referrals. "By then I had opted to work in the Singapore prison...who would refer patients to me?"

When asked how others responded when he mentioned that he was still rotating as an MO, Dr. Tan recalled:

"Some would just be silent, or say 'good for you...take your time to think.' Sometimes I get vibes about being a dreamer and that if I had really sorted it out I would have finished my anaesthesia exams."

Dr. Tan took a jocular approach to his circumstances, telling his medical colleagues: "You know if your patients do not pay you...and if you want a few gangsters...I know quite a few."

Trade-offs and Decisions...



Dr. Tan and his children in their "Castle" in Yunnan, China

In many respects Dr. Tan has learned to “control [his] cost.” By this he referred to looking at the price and the lifestyle, and figuring out if it was worth the number of years it would cost to pay it off.

“We counted the costs and weighed different options. I don’t own a car, and I don’t own a house. My luxuries are that I save money and every ten to fifteen years I go back to school as a full-time student. I do a Master’s degree somewhere nice e.g., I studied for two years at Regent College in Vancouver. It was lovely. Hopefully studying full-time is a cheaper and healthier drug-free way to keep dementia at bay. I would rather pay tuition fees than buy a dream house.”

Dr. Tan was quick to acknowledge that he was “blessed to have a highly intelligent wife who was willing and committed to go with me to work with the poor.” To help in his decision to move to China, Dr. Tan read books such as *City of Joy*, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and *Cancer Ward*; attended talks by surgeons Dr. Andrew Ng and Dr. Tan Teng Kok during his time in medical school; and travelled extensively.

"During vacation my wife and I would go somewhere interesting...Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Thailand, and ask ourselves one question: Can we work here? That was our vacation! My wife and I would talk about what factors would make us feel [that we have led significant lives] at the end of 50 or 60 years, we chose to work with a rural poor community as it is a really meaningful way to invest our years."

The age of his children also factored into his decision.

"Our children were young when we were in Yunnan; they had a rich childhood. It was sweet-and-sour. We had moments of fun as well as grief because we work with disabled children and with villagers living in tough conditions."

Thoughts on health professions education

"If you enter medicine for the prestige or for career security rather than the privilege and joy of being a doctor, it fades very quickly by the time you are thirty-five years old."

"I hope parents wise up and are brave enough to affirm their kids in their strengths and talents. I still meet students at NUS who tell me 'Oh I am in accounting (or _____) but I really want to do design, but my dad told me to do this.'"

If you enter medicine for the prestige or for career security rather than the privilege and joy of being a doctor, it fades very quickly by the time you are thirty-five years old... and you may not enjoy it anyway. It goes back to what my mother told me: 'You are my son you are always my son. I don't need face for you to be a doctor.' My mother gave me the freedom to enter medical school, and I really appreciated that all the more throughout my years there."

Dr. Tan noted that as a society that is focussed on economic growth, we may be interested in education more because of the fruits of education in terms of the career and salary but not for education and learning. "We need to find a balance," explained Dr. Tan.

The push for medical graduates to specialise at an early stage is a concern for Dr. Tan.

"What if students choose a certain residency because they are insecure? The good side of the residency programmes is that you get systematic training but the downside is that we may get doctors with mid-career disillusionment. How do we handle that?"

Increasing subspecialisation is another concern.

"We really need allied health professionals at the forefront of healthcare. You cannot outsource physiotherapy, chronic care, or community care. I dream of seeing pharmacists in day care centres for senior citizens – talking with the senior citizens about their medication at the gym or after

their mah-jong game. As a healthcare family we need to change our mindset [and] put our money into community care. This is already happening and should be valued and highly encouraged."

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Thoughts for aspiring medical students:

Take the time to decide what you want to do. "Ask yourself, what is a career for? Is a career for life or is life for a career? Is my career a tool or a master for me?" Additionally, figure out whether you are interested in healthcare or interested in being a doctor. In the future, the lines will merge.

"Speech therapists and special education experts for disabled children will be in high demand in the years to come. After all, future generations could well send a genetic swab and get a diagnostic report via email but rehab is something that Facebook or Google cannot do so well. Some are interested in becoming a doctor but have little interest in other healthcare professions – that to me could be an ego issue in the hiding."

Thoughts on healthcare leadership:

Grant sabbaticals to promising healthcare leaders. "Sabbaticals may be two months plus one month annual leave where one can go and learn art, acupuncture, etc., or work in a rural hospital, with a disabled community, etc.,"

Dr. Tan's Current Work

Dr. Tan is currently at his "dream job." At the College of Alice and Peter Tan (NUS), Dr. Tan teaches a module called "Hidden Communities of Singapore," in which undergraduates from different faculties walk through the sections of Singapore that are marginalised, less noticed, and somewhat forgotten.



"A dream job." Mentoring students at the College of Alice and Peter Tan at the National University of Singapore"

"We interact with senior citizens living in low-income HDB areas. We learn about the sleaze and sadness in the back lanes of Geylang through night walks and visits and the trauma of child abuse. We debate the policies that have led to income inequality. We also visit super-efficient engineers who keep Singapore humming through the wee hours of the night - doing repairs and maintenance, works that we take for granted.



Invited Senior Citizens from the HDB heartland at the College of Alice and Peter Tan at the National University of Singapore. The students visited the seniors in their community as part of a student community effort

The theme at the College is 'Active Citizenship and Community Engagement.' It is a lovely balance of activism, reading and learning, as well as hands on serving. I also have the privilege of taking third year medical students from NUS through the crowded dorms of foreign construction workers and the voluntary clinics that provide low-cost care for these workers.

As I said, "it's a dream job."

In a famous essay on Tolstoy "The Hedgehog and the Fox," Isaiah Berlin divided people into hedgehogs and foxes based upon a Greek parable: "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." We find Dr. Tan is nothing short of a fox by nature however, we cannot help but recognise the overarching hedgehog values that guide his decisions in life—his courage and conviction to contribute to society and to serve the poor and

vulnerable in the community, his love for and of learning and discovery, his servant-leadership, and his unwavering faith to live life according to his values, doing what he loves.