When Associate Professor Tan Thai Lian was a young doctor training to become a geriatric specialist in the mid-1990s, an elderly patient under his care unexpectedly ended his own life.

“This patient was admitted after a fall... We knew he was depressed but we didn’t know he had any intention to take his life, so we did not take suicide precautions,” said Prof Tan, 51, who is now deputy chairman of the medical board at Woodlands Health Campus. “It was a very traumatic experience for me. I felt lost and didn’t know what to do.”

But the tragic incident became a touchstone moment that cemented Prof Tan’s decision to become a geriatrician. “My mentor, Professor Pang Weng Sun, who was the consultant covering the ward at the time, immediately stepped in to attend to the family members and to assure me that what happened was not my fault. That left a deep impression on me,” said Prof Tan.

Prof Tan later went on to head the department of geriatric medicine at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, where he conceptualised and helped to establish the division of integrative and community care in 2008. He was also clinical director of Ren Ci Hospital from 2009 to 2013.

Prof Tan and Prof Pang, who is now deputy group chief executive for population health at the National Healthcare Group (NHG), were among the 41 individuals and 13 teams recognised for their contributions to public healthcare at the annual NHG Awards held in Khoo Teck Puat Hospital yesterday.

Prof Tan was one of four clinicians to receive the NHG Distinguished Achievement Award.

Prof Pang, 59, the third doctor in Singapore to specialise in geriatric medicine, received the top award – the Lee Foundation’s NHG Lifetime Achievement Award, which is given to clinicians who have contributed significantly to elevate the quality of public healthcare in Singapore and improve the lives of Singaporeans.

The pioneering geriatrician said he became interested in caring for old people after visiting nursing homes as an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore.

Prof Pang said he remains driven by his conviction that healthcare should not only be about patients’ physical needs but also their social and emotional needs, as well as that of their loved ones. “Especially now, at this time of life, it is very important that the patient has a voice, and that the loved ones have closure,” he said.

The awards were presented by Madam Kay Kuok, who chairs the NHG and was the guest of honour at the event.