

Special Focus:

## Women in Medicine



# Dr Lily Neo: Physician, Politician, Wife & Mother

### Can you tell us why you chose Medicine?

My parents' priority was to give their children a good education and they have always wanted me to attain as high an education as possible. At the time, the thing to do was to pursue a course in Medicine or Law. Somehow, even before I reached my teens, becoming a doctor seemed the obvious path for me. I felt that it was a worthwhile profession; chance to do something worthwhile and satisfying – helping people, reducing their suffering and even saving lives.

### With respect to opportunities (education- and career-wise) and society's perception of women doctors, what changes have you observed since your days as a medical student?

Nowadays, women doctors are certainly perceived to be just as competent as their male counterparts. In fact, many women and children prefer being treated by female doctors for a variety of reasons. No more is the concept that women in Medicine are a waste of national funds. No more do people think that women cannot progress to the pinnacle of medical practice. The removal of the quota for female students in University entrance for the medical course is a significant milestone that puts female and male doctors on equal footing, in terms of gender equality and contribution

by female doctors for the good of the community. Generally, I think Singaporean women are heading for greater heights in all aspects of life even as of now. They are being heard and they are being taken more seriously even in male-dominated areas. Our education system is in favour of women coming out equal to men. There will be more highly educated women who can exert their rightful place in society and women will have a lot more impact in society as a whole. The resultant effect will put the women here in a better position than many other countries in the world.



Dr Neo is married to Dr Ben Neo, a gynaecologist in private practice. They have two children.

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**About the interviewee:**

Dr Lily Neo (MB Bch, 1980) practises family medicine in the heartlands. Dr Neo is also well-known as the Member of Parliament for Jalan Besar, and Chairperson of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health.

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**As a practising medical doctor, Member of Parliament, wife and mother, what challenges do you face in juggling these different roles? What keeps you going? Do you have any advice to share with other women doctors who juggle multiple roles?**

Having so many roles simply means that everyday there are just loads to handle and settle. How do I manage that? Firstly, remembering that this is the right path for me and I can enjoy doing what I have chosen. Secondly, planning well ahead and having good time management. And thirdly, being conscious that I need to prioritise and try to tackle the most pressing issues first for each day. My motto is: "Have a right mindset and look at problems as challenges that can and will be surmounted."

**Does your medical background play an important part in your role as a politician?**

I think it does because it is an integral part of training that doctors learn the skills of listening to the problems and complaints of patients, and dealing effectively on the solutions. This is especially helpful for my Meet-The-People sessions and interaction with the grassroots. One also learns to be patient as a doctor. This asset comes from the many years of medical education and training in the hospitals, and often comes in handy in gaining better rapport with the grassroots leaders and residents. I feel that my medical background has contributed to my being more analytical and this is valuable for a politician.

**Are there changes that you hope to see in Singapore's healthcare system in the next 10 years?**

Yes, of course. Whilst we do have a fairly good system now, there is still room for us to improve upon what we have. I hope to see better integration and utilisation of our resources.

As I am particularly concerned with our increasing numbers of elderly and their potential healthcare needs, I would like to see strengthening of facilities for step-down care, either in the institutional, day-care or home-care settings, to cater to the needs of a "more mature" society. There is a need to emphasise training of more healthcare professionals and other informal caregivers for the elderly. The priority on the step-down care of the elderly will be in assisting them to live as independently and for as long as possible in their own homes with appropriate support. The aim is to maximise independent living and social functioning, and to minimise avoidable hospital admissions and premature or avoidable dependence on long term care in institutional settings.

There should be appropriate support services to help maintain the frail elderly in the community for as long as possible. Homecare with domiciliary services, daycare with rehabilitation facilities, as well as occupational therapy services with equipment and adaptations at homes should be made readily available.

There is strong evidence that comprehensive assessments, followed by implementation of individual care plans, can reduce the risk of older people being re-admitted to hospitals or placed in long-stay care. It also improves survival rates, and physical and cognitive functioning. To do all these, we need the involvement of relevant therapists; in particular, we need occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists.

Our homecare services are almost non-existent at present. We need to make this service available quickly in order to lessen the need for high-cost stay in tertiary institutions, especially acute hospitals. Most times, step-down care patients require rehabilitation. Older people who need rehabilitation usually suffer from a wide range of conditions and their needs are often complex.

**We understand that your daughter is currently pursuing her medical studies in NUS. Was she inspired to follow in your footsteps? What advice do you have for fellow doctors whose children wish to pursue the same career?**

She says that my husband and I have influenced her, through our lifestyles and attitudes toward our work. However, the decision to read Medicine was ultimately her own. I believe this is vitally important because a career in Medicine is demanding; the training can be strenuous and lengthy; the work itself requires keen interest and dedication.

For fellow doctors whose children wish to pursue the same career, my advice to them is: help your child gain a clear picture of what the training and a career in Medicine entail expose the child to the hospital and clinic settings; be encouraging if your child indicates interest; support them through words of affirmation.



*Dr Neo with her daughter.*

**Do you make an effort to set aside time for your family?**

Yes, I do, although it requires me to make a conscious effort to do so. I try to engage them in their daily schedules concerning their work and other activities. I try to get involved with their thoughts or concerns. Good thing I can be just a phone call away when I am at work. We enjoy going out for meals together as a family whenever we can. Holidaying together is a must. ■

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