

# Excuse Me, But What Exactly Do You Do?

## Interview with Dr Teoh Chin Sim

Interview by A/Prof Cuthbert Teo, Editorial Advisor



Dr Teoh Chin Sim graduated with MBBS from the National University of Singapore and Masters in Sports Science (Honours) from the United States Sports Academy. Dr Teoh became Singapore's first female sports and exercise medicine specialist. She is also a Senior Consultant of the Sports and Exercise Medicine Centre at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. **Dr Teoh Chin Sim (TCS)** has also been the team physician for Singaporean athletes at major sporting events for three decades, most recently as the chief medical officer for Team Singapore at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. Here, **A/Prof Cuthbert Teo (CT)** speaks with her to find out more about what her work really entails.

### **CT: What was it like leading the Team Singapore medical team for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics?**

**TCS:** As a sports and exercise physician, the past two and a half years were unlike anything I had ever encountered. Having led the Team Singapore medical team to multiple major games, preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was, I daresay, the most complex thus far due to the evolving COVID-19 situation in Japan and around the world. Athletes competed sans spectators (in stark contrast to the recent Vietnam Southeast Asian Games), and produced personal bests, national records, Games records and world records no less!

Thankfully, the tide seems to have turned with the resumption of local and international sporting events and less restrictive safe management measures as

COVID-19 vaccination continues around the world and the virus evolves. We are still learning about COVID-19 though, especially about its long-term effects on health and sports performance.

### **Early days of sports medicine**

#### **CT: Where did your career in sports medicine start?**

**TCS:** It was 30 years ago when I started my journey at the Sports Medicine and Research Centre of the Singapore Sports Council (SSC). We were housed in the National Stadium, home of the Kallang Roar and Kallang Wave where 55,000-strong crowds watched many a Malaysia Cup match.

#### **CT: When you began your career, did people understand what sports medicine was about?**

**TCS:** "Excuse me, but what exactly do you do? Do you wear shorts to work and play badminton with athletes every day?" A well-meaning classmate asked me that when he first heard that I had gotten a job as a medical officer at the SSC. He was not to be blamed, of course, because sports medicine was a discipline that existed primarily in the SSC and the Singapore Armed Forces back then.

#### **CT: When did sports medicine become a specialty?**

**TCS:** It would be more than two decades before the specialty had its first fellows inducted to the Academy of Medicine, Singapore in 2015. Today, sports and exercise medicine physicians can be found in both private and public practice, rendering care to the elite and recreational athlete as well as advising our patients and the public on how



exercise and fitness are key pillars of health, and even a form of “medicine” to prevent illness and treat disease.

### Physician to athletes

**CT: I am sure many people ask you this question – but what is it like treating elite athletes?**

**TCS:** People often wonder what it is like to see and treat elite, national athletes. They are patients who have cares and concerns just like anyone else, with the added demands of their sport, and they also shoulder the expectations of many stakeholders, including their country. As a team physician, my role is to support them as best as I can in their athletic pursuit, but also to be their medical advocate and, very occasionally, this duty may “make people unhappy”.

But nothing in medical school training could have quite prepared me for the time I opened my clinic room door at the SSC to a sea of news reporters standing outside wanting to know if soccer celebrity Fandi Ahmad would be cleared to play at a Malaysia Cup match at the National Stadium the next day! What I thought was a private matter and decision between the patient, his coach and doctor became public knowledge in print where I was referred to as “Fandi Ahmad’s groin doctor” (as the injury was you-know-where)! Fortunately, all was

taken in good spirits as sports creates an atmosphere of camaraderie. Fandi and I also continue to stay connected till this day.

**CT: What’s your take on doping in sports?**

**TCS:** Other than health and injury concerns, sports and exercise physicians need to be well-versed in the area of anti-doping in sport. Time and again, we read about athletes who are sanctioned for using banned substances without therapeutic reasons, sometimes inadvertently. In fact, all medical practitioners treating national athletes should acquaint themselves with the World Anti-Doping Agency’s List of Prohibited Substances and Methods (List), updated annually in January, and you can also cross-check medications with the Anti-Doping Singapore’s Check Drugs Database.

**CT: You must travel all over the globe for your work?**

**TCS:** I am blessed indeed to have travelled the world – save the African continent – over the past three decades through my involvement at major games, in women and sport, anti-doping in sport, and para sport. Each of the games, each international meeting, each team, each committee, each person and each encounter is unique.

**CT: Tell us about one incident in your travels which stands out.**

**TCS:** Of the many, the London 2012 Paralympic Games stands out as one of the most significant turning points in my medical career.

One day, while on the bus to the equestrian venue, I struck up a conversation with an athlete in a wheelchair and asked about how she was introduced to equestrian sport. She shared that she had in fact represented New Zealand in show jumping in the past. Several years before the London Games, she had survived a tragic car accident, waking up to find her boyfriend and best girlfriend dead upon impact, and herself paralysed from waist down. Over the next few years of untold pain, she got back on the horse again for rehabilitation, then training, but this time in para dressage.

As we parted company, I reflected on the risks of her sport where she could sustain further injuries, such as to her cervical spine like the late Christopher Reeves. It was an amazement to me how someone, having lost her love, her best friend, the use of her legs and indeed much of her former life, carved out a new identity for herself.

**CT: So, sports can really unlock a person’s potential.**

**TCS:** Yes, the exposure and awareness of how sports can unlock the potential of an individual and inculcate a “can-do” mindset despite the seemingly dire circumstances, provided the impetus for change – in my mind, my heart and my entire being – and fostered a passion in para sports to harness its potential to positively impact the rehabilitation journey of an ill or injured person. In addition, I realised how some of us who seem perfectly able never quite live out our potential because we are paralysed instead by our fears and doubts, and complain about what we do not have, instead of maximising what we do have.

### Lessons gleaned

**CT: What have all these people you have met taught you?**

**TCS:** Since that day on the bus, I have had the good fortune of meeting numerous individuals who have taught me much about living life to the fullest, no matter what hand it deals you. They also have a fine sense of humour and compassionate hearts to encourage others in need.

**CT: Any anecdotes from the ASEAN Para Games?**

**TCS:** I recall an incident at the ASEAN Para Games held in 2015 in Singapore.



A wheelchair athlete had rolled into our team medical centre at Marina Bay Sands to ask if I had anything for his skin rash on the anterior shin. Without thinking, I asked if it were itchy as the skin looked rather red, to which he replied, “I don’t know, Dr Teoh, because I cannot feel anything!” The roomful of athletes and medical personnel including the athlete himself burst out laughing when I responded sheepishly, “Oh gosh, silly me! What am I asking, but of course you can’t feel it (due to past spinal cord injury)!”

**CT: Tell us about an athlete who can inspire us.**

**TCS:** Earlier that same year, calamity struck Tan Whee Boon, who lost all four limbs to gangrene following septicaemia from eating raw fish. During his arduous rehabilitation journey, Whee Boon fell in love with wheelchair rugby and now represents Singapore in the sport. He actively promotes it and invites others to wheelchair rugby try-outs on Friday nights at Toa Payoh Sports Hall. He also got himself trained to work independently in a new industry and to become a befriender. He regularly volunteers in an amputee support group and a community sports playgroup for children of various physical abilities called PlayBuddy. In December 2021, Whee Boon was awarded the Goh Chok Tong Enable Award in recognition of his achievements, and he generously set aside ten percent of the award to buy appreciation gifts for PlayBuddy volunteers.

**CT: Thank you Chin Sim. Any final words?**

**TCS:** Little did I know that sports medicine would provide such a myriad of opportunities and experiences that



have shaped how I think, what I do and the company I keep now. Looking back, I cannot help but be filled with gratitude for these enriching life lessons and am excited for my younger colleagues, knowing that they too will reap much as they sow into their careers in service to others.

*Find your passion. Look for a need. Start where you are. It only takes one. Just do it. ♦*

PlayBuddy was birthed in 2016 after Dr Teoh learnt that one of her physiotherapy colleagues wished to work with children with neurological conditions that impair their movement. They started with one child with cerebral palsy. At the time of the writing of this article, PlayBuddy turned six and they threw a big birthday party in celebration with the children, their families, caregivers, volunteers, and benefactors!

### Legend

1. Dr Teoh and medical and secretariat team at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games
2. Dr Teoh standing by her mentor, the late Dr Teh Kong Chuan, at the Chiang Mai 1995 Southeast Asian Games
3. Dr Teoh holding her National Healthcare Group (NHG) Outstanding Citizenship Award trophy at the NHG Awards Ceremony 2022
4. Wheelchair rugby athlete Tan Whee Boon and friend Lewis Huang, introduced by Dr Teoh

A/Prof Teo is trained as a forensic pathologist. The views expressed in this article are his personal opinions.

