

My Father, My Inspiration

Interview with Prof Phua Ghee Chee



In this issue where we hear from families in medicine, a father-and-son duo not to be missed is Prof Phua Ghee Chee, Deputy CEO of Singapore General Hospital (SGH), and his father, renowned clinician Prof Phua Kong Boo, paediatric gastroenterologist, emeritus consultant in KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) and recipient of the 2020 SMA Honorary Membership. Both father and son have attained great heights in the practice of medicine, with Prof Phua Kong Boo even having an illness named after him – the PKB Syndrome.

In this interview, SMA News hears from Prof Phua Ghee Chee about his experience growing up as a doctor's son, and what it is like to follow in his father's footsteps.

Tell us more about your father, Prof Phua Kong Boo, and yourself.

My father is a professor of paediatrics who has been in public service for more than 50 years. He is a well-respected clinician, researcher and educator. He has garnered many awards and accolades over the years, including Master Academic Clinician, Emeritus Consultant, Distinguished Mentor, Service Superstar Awards and more. He continues to maintain a busy clinical practice in KKH today.

I am a respiratory and ICU physician at SGH, where I have worked for the past two decades. I was the former Programme Director of the SingHealth Internal Medicine Residency Programme, and I led the Department of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine from 2017 to 2022. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

I led the SGH and SingHealth ICU Committee. Currently, I serve as the deputy CEO of SGH, and the Chief Wellness Officer at SingHealth.

Going into medicine

When and why did you first decide that you wished to be a doctor?

Since I was a child, my father frequently took me to the SGH Campus. I recall doing homework in his office in Bowyer Block while he was on his weekend ward rounds. I played squash in the indoor court behind today's Level 9 staff lounge, ate chicken rice at the old house officer's canteen (which is the site of today's Academia building), and played tennis at the court where today's container isolation ward stands. Having been exposed to his workplace from a young age, it seemed natural for me

to be a doctor and I did not seriously entertain any other career. However, I only decided on the path and applied to medical school after getting my A Level results, as I was not sure that my results would qualify for medical school.

What was the most challenging part of being a doctor's son?

My father worked long hours, and on most weekends and public holidays for as long as I could remember. Still, because he frequently took me to his workplace and made time for me, I never felt that he was unavailable.

What did you admire most about your father, as a doctor?

He is completely dedicated to his patients and absolutely devoted to his craft. Even today, I see him reading books and journals about his specialty

every day. He has always remained humble and approachable, and I try to model myself after him every day.

Did your father encourage/support your pursuit of and career in medicine? Did his choice of specialty influence your own?

At no time in my growing up did he tell me that he wanted me to be a doctor. He always encouraged me to make my own decision. Nevertheless, the memories of him working so hard in the hospital and being so dedicated to his patients inspired me and led me to believe that the medical profession was a career where I could similarly find meaning and my calling in.

As a paediatrician, he specialised in gastroenterology and hepatology. Even though I liked paediatrics, internal medicine was always my first choice

and I decided to do my postgraduate training in internal medicine, followed by respiratory and intensive care medicine.

A family in medicine

Has your shared experience in healthcare with your father brought you closer together?

Absolutely! We talk about our clinical and non-clinical work. I have learnt a lot from his experiences and his wisdom. A precious opportunity I was very grateful for was him bringing me along sometimes for his clinics and rounds when I was a medical student. I certainly benefited clinically from this as well.

How have your other family members supported both of you on the medical journey?

Both my mother and my wife (who is a family physician) have been most

supportive of our careers, which frequently takes us away from our families. We are most grateful to them.

Do your children wish to pursue medicine as well?

My daughter is currently a third-year medical student in Singapore, and my son, who is currently serving National Service, is hoping to get into medical school. Both of them were heavily influenced and inspired by their grandfather and, hopefully, a little by me. ♦

Legend

1. Prof Phua Kong Boo (second from left) with family, attending a dinner in his honour hosted by KK Women and Children Hospital

2. Dr Phua Ghee Chee with his family (including Miso, their beloved dog)

