

The Stories of Siblings



Have you ever wondered what it might be like to pursue a medical career with not just your friends as peers and colleagues, but your siblings as well? Below, Dr Ng Chee Kwan and Dr Lim Ing Haan share their respective experiences and fond memories of studying and practising medicine together with their siblings.

Text by Dr Ng Chee Kwan

You could say that I come from a family of doctors. It all started with my father who is a family physician. I think my decision to study medicine came from observing my father at work and knowing that his patients really appreciated him, and that he was an important part of the community that he served. When the time came for me to decide, it was an easy choice for me to study medicine.

As the eldest of three siblings, and being a somewhat unadventurous person, I decided to study medicine in Singapore, despite being given the opportunity for overseas study. My sister and brother had their late secondary and pre-university education overseas (perhaps my parents made them do it), and so it was natural for them to continue with their medical studies abroad.

It was nice to know that all of us were following in our father's footsteps. There was no sense of competition among us since we were all in different cohorts and personally, I was too busy trying to

stay afloat among the deluge of tests and examinations to try and compete with my siblings.

I do admire that my siblings had an overseas education and the opportunity to enjoy living in a different country, and I also admire their accomplishments. My sister, who works in the pharmaceutical industry, often has opportunities for overseas assignments and travels all over the world. My brother has also done very well for himself as a surgeon, and I enjoy the occasional times when we work together during surgery.

I believe most siblings in medicine end up in different roles so as not to overlap, though I do know of siblings pursuing the same specialty and it seems to work out well too. I find it a blessing to have siblings in medicine as we can consult with each other, and we know that we have each other's back.

My brother and I work in the same hospital, with both our clinics on the same floor. The occasional downside to having a sibling in medicine is that my

patient may turn up at his clinic, and vice versa, since the first two syllables of our names are the same. I have also come to accept that the hospital nurses will sometimes make phone calls to me by mistake when they are actually looking for my brother. All in all, I think that's a small price to pay for having siblings in medicine.

Ng Chee Kwan is a urologist in private practice and current 1st Vice-President of the SMA. He has two teenage sons whom he hopes will grow much taller than him. He has probably collected too many watches for his own good.



Text and photos by Dr Lim Ing Haan

Ing Ruen and I are from a small nuclear family. We grew up around the slogan “Girl or Boy, Two is enough” and the classic image of two girls sheltered under an umbrella sharing an apple never failed to give me a sense of pride. We could not have known that in those days, boys were favoured over girls.

In our family, education was the most important. My maternal grandmother, then a teacher at Chung Cheng High School, rushed to get a letter of recommendation from the Catholic Church for us to be accepted to Canossa Convent Primary School when we were barely one year old. My dad, then a teacher at Catholic High, preferred St Nicholas Girls’ School. He tried to get a letter from the Catholic High School principal, Brother Joseph Dufresse Chang, who declared that at our age of one, my father’s demands were too premature. Even in those days, our parents were hilariously desperate in the primary school registration exercise. I can remember clearly that at the primary school registration, our parents submitted a letter requesting that Ing Ruen and I be admitted to Primary School as one student. Such was the gravity of the situation – their desire that we remain together in the school of their choice.

Fast forward through the years, we were always in the same class even as we entered Singapore Chinese Girls’ School and Hwa Chong Junior College. Our grades were almost always identical and in a meritocratic system, that meant we were always banded together in the same class, much to the dismay of our teachers. We both made the decision to follow in the footsteps of the many generations of doctors on Mum’s side. It was our dream to become doctors. Our parents encouraged us to apply for an international scholarship as a safety net because our parents could only afford a local medical education for both of us. The Public Service Commission (PSC) provided us with scholarships to attend any Ivy League school in the US or any



university in the UK in any discipline of our choice, and we were both accepted at several schools. Despite PSC repeatedly urging us to accept their offer, local medical school admission results were not expected until April. In the end, we forfeited our PSC scholarships because the ones available were not for medical studies.

We were desperate to get into the NUS Faculty of Medicine, and were thankfully both accepted. I once ran into the Dean of Medicine along the long corridors of the National University Hospital. He realised that the twins had been accepted and exclaimed that it was impossible! With only one local medical school, an intake of only 145 students in 1990 and a one-third female admission quota, the odds for simultaneous admission of twins may have seemed insurmountable, but they were not. We are eternally grateful for the opportunity to study medicine.

As expected, only half of our classmates and friends could tell us apart. To pre-empt embarrassing friends or alienating colleagues, we decided that it was prudent to get to know each other’s friends and colleagues well. In fact, to reduce confusion, the Ministry of Health even wrote to tell us that we should not be in the same department for our house officer and medical officer (MO) postings. They did however, grant our requests for the earlier postings to be in the same hospital for logistical reasons because we shared a car.

We finally got tired of seeing each other every day and made a deal: one would be a surgeon and the other a physician. Ing Ruen decided to become an ENT surgeon and swiftly passed

her examinations in the first MO year, followed by her Fellowship of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons. I began my training in internal medicine, which led to a position in cardiology.

Having a twin sibling in medicine for us is really fun. We get to compare our milestones at every stage. We are galvanised and motivated by each other because we are genetically the same. We are energised by each other’s accomplishments and stunned by each other’s failures. But because of the knowledge that there are two of us, we do not get discouraged or disheartened easily. There is always a sister behind each of us to offer comfort. So perhaps it is not unexpected that both of us now share a clinic in Mount Elizabeth Hospital. ♦

Legend

1. My mom, Chang Lu Yee, is always brilliant and witty. My dad, Lim Hong Quee, once Discipline Master at Catholic High Secondary School, is well loved by generations of students

2. From left: Dr Chng Nai Wee, Dr Lim Ing Ruen, Dr Lim Ing Haan and Dr Gregory Leong at the Eagle Eye Gala Dinner in 2016

Dr Lim is the first female interventional cardiologist in Singapore. She is an early adopter of new technology and is a key opinion leader in international cardiology conferences. She shares a clinic with her twin, Dr Lim Ing Ruen, an ENT surgeon in Mount Elizabeth Hospital. Both believe in the power of food, travel, laughter and loyalty in forming strong family bonding.

