Source: *The Sunday Times,* pA14
Date: 1 June 2025

Record 121 graduate from Duke-NUS Medical School

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung with graduating students of Duke-NUS Medical School on May 31. Of the 72 doctor of medicine graduates, 41 per cent made mid-career switches from fields such as law and public relations. ST PHOTOS: AZMI ATHNI

Chin Hui Shan

With no background in science, Dr Faith Wong pursued her calling of becoming a doctor at the age of 40.

The mother of one previously graduated with a degree in model-making from Arts University Bournemouth and then worked in the animation industry.

She had suffered depression as a teenager, which was subsequently diagnosed as bipolar disorder, and the experience led her to want to become a doctor.

On May 31, the now 44-year-old fulfilled that wish and was among 121 graduates from Duke-NUS Medical School at the Ngee Ann Kongsi Auditorium at Academia located at the Singapore General Hospital Campus. This was the largest number of graduates for a class in its 20-year history.

Dr Wong was among the 41 per cent of the 72 doctor of medicine graduates who made mid-career switches from fields such as law, public relations, accounting and mental health support. The other 49 of the 121 graduated with PhDs or master's degrees.

When she was 16, Dr Wong suffered from depression, but it was subsequently diagnosed as bipolar disorder. What kept her going was her Catholic faith, therapies and healthcare workers who never gave up on her.

She was a senior peer support specialist at the Institute of Mental Health and left in 2021 to attend medical school.

She said: "I found myself deeply reflecting and praying about how best to serve others with this second lease of life. The answer that came to me, very clearly and consistently, was to become a doctor."

One major hurdle was taking the Medical College Admission Test before entry into the Duke-NUS medicine programme after not taking a major science exam for about two decades.

She said: "For the first three months, biochemistry felt like reading a foreign language."

She spent most weekday nights and weekends studying while juggling her family responsibilities.

Clinical rotations were also physically gruelling for her at first, but her stamina improved.

"There were times it felt almost impossible. But what made the difference was the unwavering support I received," she said.

She found hands-on assignments such as dissection work engaging.

Her creative thinking skills also helped her approach clinical problems from fresh angles, sometimes offering perspectives that differed from those with more traditional science training.

Her ultimate goal is to establish an emergency mental health respite care centre in Singapore, a place where people can walk in and seek help, said Dr Wong.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, who was guest of honour at the event, congratulated the graduates and acknowledged that they had taken a longer path to become medical doctors, with some whose first degrees were unrelated to medicine or science.

He encouraged them to be resilient and optimistic.

Mr Ong said patient load is high in hospitals, night calls are long, and demanding patients may even file complaints against them with the Singapore Medical Council.

He added: "I want to assure you, this is normal and par for the course. These are the inherent challenges of the profession that you have chosen, and you can overcome (them)."

He said Singapore is responding proactively to an ageing world population, medical technological advancements and a global shortage of healthcare workers, which demand healthcare transformation.

Dr Faith Wong (top) has a degree in modelmaking from Arts University Bournemouth, while Dr Loh De Rong previously studied computer science at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

Besides investing in community care systems and infrastructure, among other things, Singapore is also using more digital and artificial intelligence (AI) technology in healthcare, he said.

Mr Ong added: "They will not replace healthcare workers and the judgment of doctors, but they will remove tedious tasks, augment capabilities and create new opportunities."

He was joined by Duke-NUS dean Thomas Coffman and Dr Amy Abernethy, co-founder of healthcare start-up Highlander Health.

Another graduate, Dr Loh De Rong, 28, hopes to combine his engineering background and medical knowledge to improve healthcare systems and patient outcomes.

He is among the first batch of graduates from a special programme where Duke-NUS offers conditional admissions to pre-university students from other fields to pursue medical studies.

Under the programme, which was launched in 2017, interested students can first apply to take undergraduate studies at one of Duke-NUS' partner universities before going on to Duke-NUS Medical School to study medicine at a postgraduate level.

They undergo undergraduate studies for three or four years, then spend four more years at the postgraduate medical school.

A graduate from the Singapore University of Technology and Design, Dr Loh studied computer science, focusing on machine learning and software engineering.

He said: "As medicine continues to evolve in the AI era, I hope to contribute to clinical AI projects and be well positioned to critically evaluate how such tools are applied in healthcare."

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