

A Good Teacher Takes a Hand, Opens a Mind and Touches a Heart

Interviewed by Dr Low Sher Guan Luke, FCFP(S), Council Member, Editor

the prestigious College Teachers' Awards given out by the College of Family Physicians Singapore go out to long-serving tutors who have served tirelessly and thanklessly in various College programmes, such as the GDFM, MMed (FM) College Programme and the Fellowship programme. The tutors have long formed the backbone of the above training programmes, without which the flame of mentorship and tutelage would not have been passed on from generation to generation. All of us pass out of medical school with a bachelor's degree, but some of the more committed family physicians embark on further training in order to be better trained and equipped to meet the ever increasing needs of our ageing population. Training is never easy, and as the Navy SEALs aptly summarises it in their motto "The only easy day was yesterday".

We are privileged to get an exclusive interview from one of the most decorated tutors in the MMed (FM) College Programme, Dr Eng Soo Kiang (ESK), to find out what motivates him to train the next generation of family physicians.

College Mirror (CM):

Hi Dr Eng, it's been my honour knowing and serving alongside you! I first knew you when we were embarking on our MMed (FM) training together, and you have struck me as one of the most brilliant candidates in our batch. Can you tell us more about yourself and your current place of practice?

Dr Eng Soo Kiang (ESK):

No, I am not brilliant. But I benefited tremendously learning from my batch-mates, Dr Jean Jasmin (Lee Mi-Li) and Dr Suraj (Subramaniam Surajkumar). They are respective champions in Pediatrics & Adult Medicine. Because of them, I have many of the family medicine topics very much covered before exam. I am a family physician in a heartland clinic. I also help out at Family Medicine Centers, home care, nursing homes, social enterprise, some regional health systems, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Communications and Information initiatives.



Dr Eng Soo Kiang

CM:

After you have passed your MMed (FM) exams, you have continued to teach and inspire subsequent generations of family physicians. What drives you to train them?

ESK:

There are 2 drivers. I am a strong believer in PAL which stands for Peer Assisted Learning, even more so for adult learners. Meeting up with fellow tutors during teaching sessions fosters great collegiality akin to the camaraderie during NS men in camps (tutors are like trainees - we enjoy gossiping by the side too!)

CM:

What qualities do you think a good tutor should possess? What is the winning recipe?

ESK:

Dr Julian Lim, my teacher deconstructed it for me: Expertise (in subject matters), Experience (in pedagogy), Empathy (providing a lifeline to learners in trouble due to personal circumstances) & Effort (extra tutorials for those who asked).

CM:

Were there happy moments when you felt that all your hard work were indeed worth it?

ESK:

2 up-lifters. First, when trainees return to teach. Second, when I see them being clinically stronger than me and teaching better than me. But I do get mixed feelings whenever they acknowledge me as their tutor. While I'm grateful that they regard me as their teacher, I often do not feel as deserving as the compliments given by them. Much of the positive outcomes are results of their own effort and PAL. I merely facilitated them, cajoled their spirits and showed the way forward. They did their own walking.

CM:

Do you have any other pearls for aspiring teachers and tutors?

ESK:

Teaching is learning our craft twice, in fact thrice, as you need to revisit topics deeper and wider. There is a strong trans-generational apprenticeship component in doctoring, and we welcome teacher-volunteers into this virtuous cycle of learn-teach-relearn.

the story will never be complete without the perspectives of those trainees who have benefited from Dr Eng's tutelage. College Mirror managed to interview Dr June Tan (JT), Dr Neo Hui Yee (NHY) and Dr James Cheong (JC) who had been under Dr Eng's wing and are now starting to be promising tutors themselves.

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CM:

Dr Hi Tan, Dr Cheong and Dr Neo, thank you for coming forward to honour Dr Eng with your testimonies. Perhaps you can give us a brief introduction of yourselves?



Dr June Tan

Dr June Tan (JT):

I am Dr June Tan, a Family Physician currently practicing at a Family Medicine Clinic.

Dr Neo Hui Yee (NHY):

I am Hui Yee. I practice at a family practice clinic with other partners. I also locum in a Family Medicine Clinic as well as in an emergency department.

Dr James Cheong (JC):

I am Dr James Cheong, a Family Physician currently practising in the primary care and ILTC sectors.

CM:

How did you come to be under Dr Eng's tutelage?

JT:

I joined MMed Programme B in 2015 and Dr Eng was the tutor for our small clinical group.

NHY:

I started working with Dr Eng when I joined Lakeside Family Medicine Clinic while preparing for MMed (FM) Programme B.

JC:

I joined Dr Eng's GP practice since leaving the SAF in 2013 and he has provided mentorship to me since. I was inspired to join the MMed Programme B in 2015 and Dr Eng was one of the tutors.



Dr Neo Hui Yee

CM:

How was the training like under Dr Eng? I gather that it must be tough to be trained under one of the most decorated tutors in College!

JT:

Yes definitely, Dr Eng ensures that we practice Evidence Based Medicine and will always challenge us with tough questions. I could still remember submitting to him my first write-up of my 40 cases – imagine having 15 comments given to a half-page write-up! From this, you can see how strict and meticulous he was in checking our work. During the course of my MMed (FM) programme, he would share with us the relevant topics to read up on. Even when the course sessions had ended months before the exams, Dr Eng remained dedicated and supported our clinical group relentlessly.

NHY:

It was mentally challenging but extremely rewarding and fulfilling. Dr Eng took me through numerous practice sessions for the physical examination station whenever there were patients with good physical signs. During the course we were continuously challenged to read up on the latest Evidence Based Medicine.



Dr James Cheong

JC:

Dr Eng inspired me because he led by example and practiced what he preached. He demanded the best from the trainees and gave himself no less slack. He possesses a deep repository of updated evidence-based medical knowledge, which inspired many to emulate. Rather than spoon-feed information, he would inquire, guide and encourage the trainees to learn smart and hard.

CM:

Were there challenging moments when you felt like giving up? How did Dr Eng help you through those moments of crises?

JT:

I must admit the course was tough and there were a few times when I questioned myself if I should really carry on and was doubtful on passing the exams.

As a clinical tutor, Dr Eng would encourage me to move on and he would give me helpful tips on how I can be more efficient in learning. I am really grateful for his guidance and encouragement.

NHY:

Indeed there were times when I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount to study and the assignments. Dr Eng advised me to be optimistic especially nearing the examination period and assured us that we would pass! That helped me to feel better about sitting for the examinations.

JC:

Like many of my classmates, I had to juggle family, work and learning all at the same time. The sheer amount of knowledge and skills to be honed in a short time was demanding. Throughout this time, Dr Eng continued to encourage and inspire. I would recall waking up many times in the morning to see his latest medical feeds to clinical questions posted by students via WhatsApp or email. We were inspired and moved on these occasions. You can really sense his passion for teaching and as his students, we wanted to do him proud.

CM:

I hear you are starting to tutor the next generation of family physicians. How has the experience been so far?



What is the Future of Family Medicine in Our Singapore?

Speech delivered by A/Prof Lee Kheng Hock, President, 25th Council, College of Family Physicians Singapore, at the World Family Doctor Day Celebration held on the 20th May 2017

the ancient Romans worship Janus the god of beginning, transitions and the future. Janus is a god with two faces. One face is always look back into the past and the other look forward into the future. The ancients knew that the past and the future are inseparable. It is said that man cannot comprehend the mind of God because our mortal perspective is always from the past and we can only experience the present. God however is timeless. Past, present and future happens at the same "time".

As mortals, we can only attempt to look into the future of family medicine by looking for data. Data is nothing more than facts and statistics gathered for analysis. For that purpose, the College embarked on a project to study our future using tools that are available to extract data. We assembled a team of knowledgeable volunteers in the College who have a front row seat on the development of family medicine in Singapore. We commissioned the FAMOUS Project (FAMily Medicine for OUr Singapore) to understand the state of family medicine and to peer into the future.

It is not possible to envision the future without looking

to our past, our origins. Arguably the first modern version of the physician who were formally trained in medical schools began in the early 1900's. Back then all graduates were general practitioners. As family physicians or general practitioners, we can claim to be the original mainstream of doctors. Family medicine as a discipline or specialty became defined in the late 1960s. Some say this was a counterculture movement in response the rapid specialisation of medicine and the fragmentation of patient care. Specialisation started in the 1930s and gained momentum in the post war years. By 1960s the downside of specialisation became apparent as it resulted in the rapid decline of the generalist. Communities around the world realised the importance of having family doctors who care for patients as unique individuals who live in the community. They are not hospital bound human being with a collection of discrete diseases. There were calls for the restoration of the generalist doctors who specialize in the treatment of persons rather than diseases or organ malfunction. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a world-wide grassroots movement to restore generalism in medicine.

The idea spread to the shores of our country. On 30th June

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JT:

So far, it has been great coming back to teach. It has enabled me to share my knowledge and tips with the next batch and also encouraged them to move on. Our tutors had put in loads of effort to train us and it's time we pay it forward. Teaching allows me to constantly revise what I've learnt and as well as to learn from the junior batch.

NHY:

It has been a really good experience. I am extremely thankful for the tutors who have taken time off their busy schedules to help us. It is an honour and privilege to be able to help teach the next generation of family physicians.

JC:

Medicine is a practice of apprenticeship and mentorship. Coming back to teach is simply reciprocity. It is also a great way to further sharpen and consolidate my clinical knowledge and skills. It is also a channel to build collegiality.

CM:

Is there anything else you will like to share with the rest?

JT:

I would like to encourage more MMed (FM) graduates to take up teaching so that the future generation of family physicians can benefit.

NHY:

Besides gaining knowledge after going through the MMed (FM) programme, I feel more empowered to manage patients holistically. It is heartening to see that more are taking up further training in family medicine to be better doctors. I hope that this trend will continue.

JC:

Medicine is lifelong journey of learning, caring and giving. I would encourage all of us to continually upgrade ourselves and strive to be stewards of primary care.

We would like to thank Dr Eng Soo Kiang and the rest of the college teachers for their tireless contribution to education in College, as well as Dr June Tan, Dr Neo Hui Yee and Dr James Cheong for picking up the baton!

■ CM