

Ex-combat medic lands spot in NUS medicine on third try

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Coming from Pioneer Junior College and with a grade “C” marring his otherwise perfect A-level results, Mr Tan Ying Li did not think he would make it to the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

When he did not succeed with his first two applications, he was ready to settle for his second choice – to study mathematics.

To his surprise, he ended up being one of the 280 selected from 2,000 applicants to the medical school this year.

Said the 21-year-old: “I was a combat medic when I was doing my national service and I realised how being a doctor can be challenging yet very meaningful, because you get to save lives.

“I come from Pioneer Junior College – not the brand name JCs like Raffles Institution or Hwa Chong where most medical students come from. I have not heard of any of my seniors from Pioneer JC getting into NUS medicine. And although I had mostly As for my A levels, I also scored a “C” for my General Paper. So I didn’t think I stood

much of a chance,” he added.

Associate Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of NUS medicine, told The Straits Times in an interview that in recent years, the faculty has drawn more polytechnic graduates and students from a wider range of junior colleges – beyond the usual suspects RI, Hwa Chong, National JC, Victoria JC and Anglo-Chinese School (Independent). Of late, 40 per cent of the incoming freshmen have come from other junior colleges, including Yishun Innova Junior College and Tampines Meridian Junior College.

In recent years, the school has also drawn between five and 10 polytechnic graduates. In previous years, it was just one or two.

This year, the school received six polytechnic graduates, including Mr Nicholas Chan, who was the first Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduate to get into the school. Mr Chan, 23, studied nursing in ITE, and then went to Nanyang Polytechnic before applying to study medicine at NUS.

The faculty draws more than 2,000 applicants a year and most have a string of As, or in the case of poly graduates, near perfect or perfect grade point averages of four.

Prof Chong noted the rising calibre of polytechnic students,

adding: “Some polytechnic students do well because they tend to be slightly older and more mature. They also show qualities such as empathy and compassion. In fact, Mr Nicholas Chan had one of the highest admission scores.”

Prof Chong, who took over as dean in January and is also senior consultant in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the National University Hospital, is a highly respected scholar and researcher in foetal growth and early development.

Noting that the faculty marked its 114th anniversary this year, he said: “Selecting students for the medical school should not be just about grades, but about whether they have the right skills and values to be good doctors.”

The faculty is introducing courses in areas such as health informatics, social determinants of health and health economics to nurture doctors who are able to adapt to new knowledge, interventions, therapeutics and changing patterns of illness.

The medical school is also studying the possibility of allowing more flexibility to students who want to combine their medical studies with other related courses or training, said Prof Chong.



“Every year we have students who take a gap year to try their hand at a start-up, take up a liberal arts course or a design course,” he said.

“It opens up options for them and enables them to combine the practice of medicine with other fields – be it health economics and administration or inventing new medical devices.”

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Mr Tan Ying Li, who went to Pioneer Junior College, was among the 280 selected to NUS’ medical school.

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