

**Headline:** He took 'scenic route' to medicine

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# He took 'scenic route' to medicine

Former air force engineer  
part of Duke-NUS pioneer  
batch graduating on Saturday

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SENIOR WRITER

MR LIM Kheng Choon, 35, who will graduate from the Duke-National University of Singapore Graduate Medical School on Saturday, admits he took the "scenic route" to his career in medicine.

He had studied mechanical engineering and spent seven years in the air force as an engineer before entering Duke-NUS, which took in its first batch of students in 2007 to turn them into doctor-scientists.

After four years of intensive study, the father of one will be among the 24 students in that pioneer batch to receive the Doctor of Medicine degree bearing the names of NUS and Duke, a top medical school in North Carolina in the United States.

Mr Lim said he was drawn to medicine as a result of having been sent to Medan to deliver medical supplies after the tsunami on Dec 26, 2004. There, he saw how doctors helped the tsunami victims, which inspired him to make the career switch.

Beyond the change in field, he also faced the challenge of hitting the books again after seven years in the workforce. "Tough, but exciting" was how he described the transition.

His professors at Duke-NUS, located on the grounds of Singapore General Hospital, said his engineering training and previous work experience probably contributed to his stellar performance as a medical student.

Not only was he one of the top in the class, but he was also the lead author for a paper on liver cancer published in the prestigious *Annals Of Surgery*.

He may have had an engineering background, but the 186 students now in the programme hold first degrees in areas ranging from business and the arts to anthropology.

Professor Robert Kamei, the school's vice-dean of education, said: "When they come from a different discipline, they bring along fresh ideas and perspectives. This sets our graduates apart from those from other schools, including NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine."

He said Duke-NUS was the target of early criticism for trying to combine medical studies with research; its detractors had said it risked producing "half-baked clinician-scientists".

The brickbats do not seem to have hurt the school - it more than doubled its annual intake after its first year. A third of the places go to foreigners, some with degrees from top universities such as Harvard, Oxford and Berkeley.

Prof Kamei, proud of the school's pioneer batch,

said they are on their way to becoming astute clinicians and skilful scientists: "Although they'll take a few years to complete their residency and make their mark in the medical world, already the early signs are there that they will make outstanding doctors."

He noted that the NUS-Duke class graduating this year outperformed their peers in US medical schools in written exams, and that a dozen of them have so far published research papers, many in top journals such as the *Annals Of Surgery*, *Journal Of Surgery*, and *Atherosclerosis*.

His colleague Sandy Cook, the senior associate dean of curriculum, agrees that the students have done well, considering the intensity of the programme: In year one, they cover the basic medical science of the human body. In year two, students



Mr Lim feels his engineering background will let him see the bigger picture when solving problems. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

acquire clinical skills at the bedsides of real patients. In year three, they go into research methodologies and complete a master's-level research project, before returning to the wards to hone their clinical skills in their fourth and final year.

The programme is structured this way to produce clinician-researchers, competent practitioners who can do research with practical applications.

Mr Lim's classmate Koh Huishan, 28, is glad to have entered medicine via another field - in her case, the liberal arts, which she read at Pomona College in California.

She said of her years in the US: "It gave me time to think about whether I really wanted to pursue medicine. After all, being a doctor requires commitment."

She added that being a liberal-arts graduate trained her in the softer skills needed in medicine, such as communicating with patients and weighing the ethics in medical issues.

She wants to go into paediatrics.

Mr Lim, on the other hand, wants to specialise in interventional radiology, the field which develops scans and X-rays for procedures such as ballooning. As a bridge between engineering and medicine, it is right up his alley.

He said: "As an engineer, when you have a problem, you look at the whole system, the bigger picture. That's a useful approach in medicine."

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