Track: Academia

Best of both worlds

Two university lecturer-researchers show how they mix and match to find fulfillment in academia and research work

by susan chan

CONTRARY to popular belief, an academic's life is not confined to the ivory tower. Dr Ho Han Rial and Dr Chong Swee Nee — two scholars who pursued their PhDs under the AVSTAR National Science Scholarship programme — split their time between the classrooms, where they lecture, mentor and interact with students, and the laboratories, where they conduct groundbreaking research that impacts society.

Dr Ho's research in treatment and mechanistic understanding in liver diseases while Dr Chong's research focuses on using natural, bio-based, environmentally friendly materials for regenerative medicine applications. Says Dr Ho, 35: "Everyone is an expert in something and is passionate about what they do. You almost always learn something new through interactions with colleagues. Discussion with people leads to unexpected opportunities for collaboration and trigger new thinking ideas."

"Through teaching, you are constantly forced to real beyond your field of interest and answer questions from students that are basic yet fundamentally important. This interaction with students forces you to constantly re-think and re-challenge the purpose of your own work so that you can continue to stay relevant to society. Also, you tend to teach more broadly, attain less in-depth, than what you research in. In this process, you discover new possibilities in your research." Dr Chong, 36, who has a PhD in Tissue Engineering from the University of Oxford, UK, adds: "PhD is a training of the mind and the discipline to solve problems in a systematic way."

"I am the only one among my group of friends, with whom I did my PhD, to take the academic path. Others are now patent lawyers, management consultants, business development managers and even entrepreneurs. Those who chose to remain in research have jobs in industry, research institutes and even financial institutions," says Dr Ho, who has a PhD in Medicinal Chemistry from the University of Washington, in the US, and is currently an assistant professor in the department of pharmacy at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He says: "It does not take someone who is exceptionally gifted in terms of knowledge, but it does take someone who is motivated and passionate about the subject of interest, and courageous enough to take this path.

There is no typical route to academia. For Dr Ho, the complexity of science that drives the discovery and usage of medicines led him to pursue the science portion of pharmacy instead of becoming a practicing pharmacist. Academic complement to research, he says.

Upon completion of his PhDs, he served a four-year stint at the Institute of Medical Biology at AVSTAR, first as a research fellow and then as senior research fellow and project leader. He joined the faculty of NUS in 2009 and has already won two teaching awards: the 2010 Faculty Teaching Excellence Award (Faculty of Sciences) and the 2011 Annual Teaching Excellence Award (NUS).

The work environment is a highly stimulating one that calls for collaboration, information sharing and constant communication among colleagues and students, he adds. It motivates the mind and encourages creativity and continuous learning. Dr Chong, who also has a Master's in Business Administration from NTU, says she enjoys the best of both worlds: as an academic, she can contribute to the research community and foster interest and enthusiasm for learning by imparting her knowledge.

"Being an academic allows me to be a researcher, teacher, mentor and student in one package. I love being on the edge of new knowledge, the intellectual challenges that each day brings and the independence that the job allows," she adds.