

A Talk With Dr. Han

ALEX MI'S INTERVIEW WITH DR. SHENGGAO HAN, MD

As a columnist for the ANACP youth group MedicineConnect, I was thrilled to learn that I had been assigned to Dr. Shenggao Han - a venerable internist and researcher from Indiana, PA - for an interview opportunity. From our half-hour talk over call, I was fascinated to learn that in addition to over 40 years of medical experience, Dr. Han was a teacher, a researcher, and even an entrepreneur. It would be an understatement to say that Dr. Han's story was both enlightening and fascinating, and now I'm about to share his history, experiences, and morals with you.

So, tell me a little bit about yourself.

"I've been living and working here for over 20 years. I'm from [the] Henan province in China, and came to the United States in 1993. I have a son who is a physician, a daughter who is in medical school, and my wife, who works in the same office with me. We are happy to live here and work here in the medicine, and will continue [doing so]."

Did you always want to be a doctor?

"When I was in high school, I really wanted to be a mathematician. But at that time [when] we tried to apply for college, the highest level of college in the Henan province was the Henan Medical University, so I chose to go there. I actually studied epidemiology, not clinical medicine, at first."

That's cool. How did you become a physician then?

"After I graduated from medical school



"When I was in high school, I really wanted to be a mathematician..."

in China, I was accepted into the university as a teacher teaching epidemiology, and then did research there. Then, I had a chance to come to the United States for the postdoctoral research teaching program in the UMDNJ (University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey). I worked there for about 10 years, as faculty and then an assistant professor. However, during that time, it was very hard to get a grant to continue research, which is why I was leaning towards clinical medicine. So, I switched my major, passed the test [USMLE], and got into a residency program. From there, I successfully became a physician, instead of a researcher."

That's quite the journey. While becoming a physician, what were considerations you made or kept in mind?

"...The teaching and research position, even so the faculty, [were] not a tenure track. So, I had to think about my career and long term goals, what I really wanted. That's why I changed [career] to clinical medicine; it seems like a better long-term goal for me."



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For sure. So, you mentioned that you have been a professor before. How would you teach students, and what was your class like?

"I like to teach, because through teaching you can also learn and refresh your knowledge yourself, and

students actually enjoy my teaching. The students learn with clinical experience; they learn from the bedside and real scenarios- not just facts from the lectures, from the books, and from the classes."



"...Through teaching, you can also learn and refresh your knowledge yourself..."

It's wonderful that the students can learn with hands-on experiences! As for your time as a physician, what does an average day as an internist look like?

"As a physician, [I] typically work 10-12 hours a day, which is common for my position. I practiced until 1 year ago, doing work in the clinic and hospital, both in-patient and out-patient. I go to the hospital in the morning to see patients, go to the office until I leave at 6 or 7 in the evening, and then go back to the hospital again if new patients are admitted. [I] try to be in the hospital with [the] patients even on weekends and holidays. My work was like this until July 2023, when I shifted my focus towards working in the office and seeing out-patients."

Wow, that is some serious dedication to your work! What did your days doing residency look like?

"During the residency training when I was on call, we had 36 hour shifts. Now [they] are 16 hour shifts, so those days in training were really tough. After graduating from residency and graduates begin practice, the hours widely vary depending on the physician and specialty. For primary care physicians like me, the lifestyle is tough, but we try our best to balance patient care and family life."



Very well said. This is sounding really tough, but if you had to look back on your time in the hospital and doing residency, what do you think was your favorite part about being an internist?

"I really like to do in-patient care, because you can track the every-day progress of patients, and you also can see the clinical changes. Usually, in-patient treatment is for acute diseases. You admit the patient to the hospital, then you order the labs, and then you follow by giving treatment and medical plans to see how the patient responds. After making the treatment plan, If the patient responds well, then you feel happy, glad that the patient is discharged home safely and healthy in two or three days.

Now, in the clinic, the majority [of the work] is regarding the primary care preventative medicine, which includes cancer screening, nutrition, vaccination, and even psychiatry counseling."

"...After making the treatment plan, If the patient responds well, then you feel happy - glad that the patient, in two or three days, is discharged home safely and healthy. "

How many patients do you usually see a day?

"About 15-20 patients a day is busy enough. [we are] very thorough with each patient, as we take [their] history, perform the physical examinations, discuss treatment plans, and explain to the patient the expectations and outcomes.

How would you describe your relationship with your patients?

"All the patients that come to my office for care, when they leave our care, they are usually satisfied. Seldom we see patients that are unhappy when we finish in the clinic. Most of the time, they like to make a follow-up visit, and are quite satisfied with the care. We treat patients like we treat our own family members - that's why our patients are happy and stay with us."

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What a beautiful comparison. With all of your ups and downs, what would you say are some of your notable accomplishments, in either your work or personal life?

“When I did research, I published quite a few publications and research papers. After becoming a clinical physician, I taught students in my clinic and hospitals, as well as second level physician assistants and nurse practitioners. I was also the clinical associate professor of LECOM Medical University.”

“...Besides the professional part, I also have a partnership business ... I built an office building that had extra space and rented it out, so other physicians



and agencies can use the facility that becomes part of my business. So, I do more than just medicine.”

So, you were simultaneously running a business while being a doctor?

“Yes, you can say it that way.”

Incredible, not many people can pull that off!

“Yes, thanks.”

Now that you've shared pretty comprehensively about your career, could you talk about some of your hobbies?

“Yes. For enjoyment, I play ping-pong, Chinese Chess, and golf. Some of my hobbies were and are actually related to medicine. Back in the day, when medical records were thick stacks of papers, I tried to develop my own electronic medical record with computer systems. It worked fairly well, and I could use it for patient care. However, Medicare enforced new laws and regulations, and every program was required to be certified. Eventually it became too difficult for me to adapt to the new rules, so I had to switch to a commercial version.”

“I'm still proud of that because I'm a physician, and I can write a computer

program. Today, I actually still use this medical records program for tracking patient information. I have created another version for the management of my office, which can do tax returns, salary payments, and other basic things.”

What do you think drove your interest in computers, for your practice?

“15-20 years ago, medical records were quite difficult and troublesome to manage. In an attempt to create a better, digital version, my interest in technology was sparked as I began to develop my own record systems. I needed that, because electronic medical records were better than popular, big folders with too many files of information.

No matter who you are, always focus on your main thing, but be open minded to learn other things. Initially I learned it [programming] because I needed it, but being a physician is still my utmost priority. It's good to have interests on the side, especially when they are medicine-related.

“...I'm still proud of that because I'm a physician, and I can write a computer program.”

That's quite profound. Now, if you were to talk to some young, aspiring medical professionals, what are some pieces of advice you would give them, having been working in health for decades now?

“First, set up your goal. If you want to be a physician, then you have to understand that it's a long process, with medical school and residency.

“Focus on your main thing, but be open minded for other things. always be open minded to learn, learn when you need...”

You need several years' training, and the courses are academically intense. But, once you get on the medical track, like a train, you are good. The important thing is that first, you know what you want to be and second, you get in [medical school], or "on the train." So, in high school, you need to make sure you prepare for college with a good MCAT score, a high GPA, and so on."

"Overall, first, set up a goal, second, know that the journey is hard, and third, get into medical school. Once you get into medical school, all you need is time and effort. the workload will be tough, but you will be rewarded later on.



Was cost an issue for you, when you were in school?

When we [my wife and I] moved to the United States, we had almost no money and didn't have much resources. I still paid my kids' medical school expenses, as it's a responsibility, and I have two more years for [my] daughter's medical school tuition. As a student, do not worry about financial obstacles because you can still get loans even if your family can't cover the costs. The important part is studying hard and getting into medical school.

It's inspiring how you came to the United States with meager resources, yet still pursued your goals with success.

"Yes."

Before we end today, what are some final thoughts that you would like to share to the students and youth following in your footsteps?

"Firstly, try to enjoy your life. As a doctor, of course I enjoy my work, but I also enjoy my hobbies - as I mentioned, I like to play ping pong, Chinese Chess, and golf... sometimes just remember to enjoy life. My second piece of advice has to be to keep a good lifestyle, maintain good health, and not have physical complications that could affect your daily life. Also, try to help others with their health. we take care of a lot of Medicaid patients in my rural community, and although it's not rewarding financially, I think that we should always support, service and pay back to our communities. Lastly, my message to the younger generation is to always be open minded - focus mainly on your career or field of study, while still being open towards learning other skills."

That's a really profound message. Well, thank you so much for spending time here for our interview - this was wonderful!

"Yeah, no problem!"

Have a wonderful rest of your day.

"...Always have good health, live a good lifestyle, and help others."



Writing this annotation of the interview, I was really able to take in the wisdom shared by Dr. Han. As an individual who, from humble origins, has walked the paths to a researcher, professor, and doctor, Dr. Han's advice is invaluable to those who wish to become medical professionals themselves, or even those who enjoy STEM. Given that my father is also a doctor, it was quite nice to see the similarities and differences in their respective specialties, and how that shaped their careers. Dr. Han has encouraged us to, while still staying true to their career and work, to "Always be open-minded." He leaves us with the ultimate advice to push through challenge, live with a good lifestyle, and still enjoy life, regardless of how busy one is.

Below is a photo of the interviewer, Alex Mi, and Dr. Shenggao Han at the 2024 Alliance of North American Physicians (ANACP) Annual Conference in Chicago, Illinois.



About the author: Alex Mi

I'm a sophomore at Carmel High School in Indiana. I am interested in pursuing a career in medicine, and am part of several healthcare/science-related activities at my school. My hobbies include playing tennis, practicing my clarinet, and writing.