



CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

## Bridging Evidence and Equity in Malaysia's Health System

*Chee Peng Hor*



Malaysia's healthcare landscape faces a complex constellation of challenges: rising burdens of non-communicable diseases, recurrent outbreaks of dengue and other vector-borne illnesses, the public health demands of an ageing population, and persistent gaps in access for marginalised and undocumented communities. These pressures intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed both the strengths and vulnerabilities of national health systems, and underscored the need for leaders who can connect clinical practice, scientific evidence, and compassionate community engagement.

These are the challenges that shape the work of Commonwealth Alumnus Chee Peng Hor, a clinician, researcher and public health advocate whose career spans infectious disease research, humanitarian medicine, community outreach, and national health system strengthening. Based in Penang, he has worked to address Malaysia's most pressing health priorities: coordinating the COVID-19 response locally, participating in national high impact clinical trials during COVID-19, organising mobile clinics for Rohingya refugees, developing capacity-building programmes for researchers across the country, and convening a national conference on the health needs of gender-diverse communities.

Peng's professional journey reflects a deep commitment to equity, evidence, and service. His work sits at the intersection of clinical medicine and public health practice, informed by sustained engagement with underserved communities and a belief that research and policy must be responsive to real world needs. His Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, an MSc in Global Health



Peng with volunteers and staff from Médecins Sans Frontières in a community hall during mobile clinic in Penang, December 2023.

and Infectious Diseases at the University of Edinburgh, played a formative role in shaping this vision, equipping him with the technical foundations, global networks, and confidence to navigate systems-level challenges and lead with purpose. Today, he continues to bridge local realities with global health principles, contributing to national policymaking, research governance, and grassroots health advocacy. His story illustrates how Commonwealth Scholars can generate meaningful, sustained impact across clinical, academic, and community spheres, strengthening health systems while advancing equity for the communities they serve.

**Chee Peng Hor** was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2011 to complete an MSc in Global Health as a Distance Learner at the University of Edinburgh. Since his graduation, Peng has remained in Malaysia, where he has made significant contributions to medical research. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he effectively coordinated the local response in his region and implemented efficacy trials for potential medications, informing treatment guidelines both in Malaysia and internationally. Through Médecins Sans Frontières, Peng has also supported the operation of mobile health clinics providing medical care to the Rohingya refugee population and undocumented individuals. In 2023, Peng organised a national conference focussing on the health needs of gender-diverse communities in Malaysia. Throughout his career, he has consistently worked towards greater equity and inclusion within Malaysia's healthcare systems.



Peng at the Old Medical School, University of Edinburgh during graduation, November 2014.

## Academic Foundations and the Transformative Role of the Commonwealth Scholarship

Peng describes his early years in Malaysia as modest but supportive, shaped by a close knit family and an understanding that opportunities were hard earned. Limited financial means instilled both gratitude and drive, and academic achievement became his pathway to broader horizons. A government scholarship to study medicine in Galway, Ireland proved transformative, introducing him to international research and sparking an enduring interest in public health and infectious diseases.

**'I grew up in a not so well-off family, so I treasure every opportunity. During the school time we are very competitive, so I try to excel, not easy.'**

Returning to Malaysia in 2009, Peng entered what he recalls as one of the toughest housemanship periods of his medical career, marked by long hours of heavy workload and little space for intellectual growth. While committed to completing his government service, he felt a strong need to keep learning. His growing interest in infectious diseases led him to seek postgraduate options—ultimately guiding him to the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship.

**'I really appreciate it very much, from the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission to do online distance learning... it taught me how to juggle my time between working on-call and managing all the deadlines. Importantly, what I learned from the course was directly applicable to my day-to-day work.'**

The Scholarship offered a rare opportunity to pursue an MSc while working full time. As the second cohort of the University of Edinburgh's Global Health and Infectious Diseases programme, Peng found the training rigorous, multidisciplinary, and transformative. Concepts gained through virtual teaching quickly informed his work on rabies and dengue outbreaks, and later during Malaysia's COVID-19 response.

## Building Global Networks That Shape Practice and Perspective

A defining aspect of Peng's Commonwealth Scholarship was the network of peers, mentors, and collaborators he built through the MSc in Global Health and Infectious Diseases – especially Dr Kim Picozzi. The programme's diverse cohort—veterinarians, public health physicians, scientists, and clinicians from across the Commonwealth—introduced him to perspectives well beyond clinical medicine.

**'I would like to acknowledge the support from the Commonwealth Scholarship, which enabled us to attend one summer school as part of the distance learning programme... the summer school at the Makerere University, Uganda... was my first time travelling such a long distance, and it turned out to be a wonderful experience.'**



Peng with fellow volunteers at Pink Triangle Foundation, Kuala Lumpur.

## Speaking of how the Commonwealth Scholarship most significantly shaped him, Peng says that he gained confidence through his training:

**'The most important thing was the confidence I gained—from the technical training, and from the interaction with my mentor. It has a long-term impact.'**

The course content exposed me to various fields in global health and infectious diseases. It's relevant to everything I pick to work on, across humanitarian medicines, and refugee health.'

The value of these networks became clear during Malaysia's COVID-19 response. Insights shared years earlier by peers working in outbreak preparedness helped shape Peng's thinking as he coordinated key elements of his hospital's pandemic efforts under directorship of Dr Norhasimawati binti Abdul Mutalib. The analytical frameworks and collaborative approaches he encountered during the MSc became steady guides during this national crisis.

**'During COVID, I remember attending a series of virtual classes organised by the British Council through Leaderonomics that really helped shape my leadership skills. A lot of the benefit came through networking and experience sharing.'**

After completing the programme, Peng's networks continued to grow. His involvement in platforms such as the WHO Global Clinical Trial Forum strengthened links between Malaysia's research ecosystem and international practice, helping shape national clinical trial priorities. These exchanges also influenced his leadership style. As a national trainer, he draws on the collaborative, discussion-driven ethos of the Scholarship, and many MSc relationships remain active touchpoints that continue to guide his thinking and reinforce his place in a global community committed to equitable, evidence-based health systems.

## Building Scientific Confidence: The Vitamin E Tocotrienols in Neuroprotection Study (VENUS)

The VENUS trial—an investigator-initiated study on the neuroprotective effects of vitamin E tocotrienols—was a formative moment in Peng's development as a clinical researcher. Conducted with Universiti Sains Malaysia under the mentorship of Professor Dr Yuen Kah Hay and Dr Irene Looi, it was the project that first enabled him to see himself as a scientist.

**'That study did shape my career. For the VENUS study, our study team received a PhaMA Award- Minister of Health Innovation and Research Award (First Runner up) in 2016. That was the biggest award we received, and that study was also my first author paper published in JAMA Neurology.'**

Originally planned for 18 months, the study ran for five years, and Peng chose to remain at his district hospital to ensure continuity—an early demonstration of research integrity. His centre ultimately enrolled the final participant. The study strengthened Peng's confidence in patient recruitment, long-term trial management and responding to scientific critique. Completing his Global Health MSc at the same time, he credits its training in protocol development, statistical analysis, and supervised research with sharpening the methodological skills he later applied as a national trainer in research methodology, evidence based medicine and quality improvement – for example, clinical audit.

## National Impact Through the Ivermectin Trial

Among Peng's research projects, the national Ivermectin trial during COVID-19 stands out as a defining moment for both his career and Malaysian public health. Commissioned by the Ministry of Health during a period of intense political pressure, the study led by Dr Steven Lim aimed to deliver rapid, robust evidence on a treatment at the centre of public debate.

**'The government needed robust evidence within six months, and that became the highlight of our study. It even received news coverage, and I felt proud of that.'**

The multicentre I-TECH trial spanned 24 hospitals and 500 patients, and despite limited resources and no infectious disease specialist, Peng's non-tertiary hospital became a top recruiting site, enrolling nearly a fifth of participants. Working with a small team during the height of the pandemic, he coordinated recruitment almost daily.

The findings were clear: ivermectin did not prevent disease progression in high-risk COVID-19 patients. The results informed national clinical guidelines, supported parliamentary briefings and, alongside a related favipiravir study, helped update Malaysia's COVID-19 Management Guideline. The resulting JAMA Internal Medicine paper became the journal's most cited article of 2022.



Peng interacting with COVID-19 patients during the early phase of the pandemic in the hospital ward, 2021, Penang.

This achievement reflects Peng's determination and the methodological grounding strengthened through his Commonwealth Scholarship, whose focus on research design, evidence appraisal and statistical interpretation equipped him to lead complex trials and translate findings into policy. For Peng, the trial represented the convergence of academic training, clinical leadership and national responsibility, showing how researcher development can shape policy at critical moments.

## Teaching and Developing Future Health Professionals

Alongside clinical and research work, Peng has built a meaningful academic role, teaching undergraduate medical students and helping nurture future Malaysian clinicians. Although he never received formal training in education, he credits his Commonwealth Scholarship with shaping his teaching philosophy.

**'I learned the teaching skill from the online distance learning. The way we conducted discussions, and the way they taught during the online sessions, was very interactive and really attracted students to pay attention... This became useful for me when I did clinical teaching for undergraduates.'**



Peng with colleagues and army officers at the establishment of the Army Field Intensive Care Unit at the hospital compound.

Beyond the university, Peng is one of Malaysia's most consistent trainers in research methodology, quality improvement, and evidence based medicine. For more than a decade, he has travelled nationwide delivering workshops, mentoring junior researchers and supporting national training frameworks through the Institute for Clinical Research, helping build a more coherent and durable research education ecosystem within the public health service. These roles show how his academic contributions extend far beyond the classroom, strengthening both the health workforce and Malaysia's wider research landscape.

**When reflecting on the most significant change he has contributed to the community, Peng feels that he is able to contribute to the sustainability and longevity of the projects he works on:**

'For me, my main contribution is helping things become sustainable. In my career, I have been fortunate to grow into leadership roles, now serving as a Head of Department and contributing at the national level in internal medicine services, policy development, and training.'

In research, I focus on mentoring and encouraging others so that the work continues beyond any single project. Through community work, I try to share my experiences and encourage others to stay committed to long-term impact.

I may not always be the innovator, but I believe my role is to help build, sustain, and grow the systems and people around me.'

## Building Research Quality, Equity, and National Protocols

Beyond his own research, Peng has become an important contributor to Malaysia's wider research ecosystem. His work now spans clinical trial design, national monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and efforts to broaden participation and equity in research. He attributes much of this capacity to the methodological grounding strengthened through his Commonwealth Scholarship.

**'The Commonwealth Scholarship strengthened my research career. I had grounded my research foundation—protocol development and writing, data analysis, and manuscript writing, through the Commonwealth Scholarship programme.'**

A notable contribution is Peng's co development of the Guideline for Conducting Investigator Initiated Trials using the Ministry of Health Research Grant, which helps researchers design impactful proposals, apply for funding and conduct high quality studies. His expertise also informs national planning: under the 13th Malaysia Plan, he helped draft Malaysia's health research priorities—particularly for clinical trials—drawing on insights from local and international engagement, including representing Malaysia at the WHO Global Clinical Trial Forum (2025) and the Regional Asian Clinical Trial Annual (REACTA) Forum (2023).

Inclusivity remains central to his advocacy. Peng promotes broader, more real world-relevant trial criteria, noting that traditional protocols often exclude groups such as pregnant women, children, and people with multimorbidity—populations whose needs should be reflected in evidence generation.



Peng with Dr Alethea Cope from Wellcome Trust at the WHO Global Clinical Trial Forum, March 2025, Geneva.

**‘Inclusivity is a challenging issue in clinical trials. Some researchers are very specific, and they often tend to exclude populations who might benefit from the trial. If we have good enough evidence to support their inclusivity, why do we always exclude them?’**

As a researcher from the Global South, Peng has also navigated language barriers, publication costs and editorial bias against “negative” findings. His perseverance, coupled with a commitment to scientific integrity, has strengthened Malaysia’s visibility in global research and supported a new generation of researchers following in his path.

### Advocating for Marginalised Communities Through Health Equity Work

Alongside his clinical, academic, and research roles, Peng has long prioritised community health, particularly for groups facing stigma and limited access to care. His work includes refugee clinics, outreach to key populations and, most notably, leadership of a national conference on the health and social needs of Malaysia’s gender-diverse community.

The 2024 conference, organised with the Penang Family and Health Development Association, was the second—and largest—national platform on transgender health in more than two decades. Together with Chairperson Dr Gan Kam Ling and the organising committee, Peng co-chaired and helped design a programme that took nearly a year to prepare due to its sensitivity. The event brought together experts across law, endocrinology, surgery, psychosocial care and public health, with a dual track format tailored separately for community members and clinicians seeking training in transgender-inclusive care.

**‘Organising this conference was not easy, because we had to invite the target audience and bridge between the community participants and the scientific participants. I had to curate a programme with parallel tracks.’**

Delivering the conference also required navigating Malaysia’s social and legal context, where public cross-dressing remains criminalised and stigma is widespread. To ensure participant safety, the organisers engaged police, religious leaders and paralegal advisors. Despite these risks, the event proceeded successfully, with a state politician attending to signal support—an important milestone for visibility and health advocacy.

**‘In Malaysia, the gender-diverse community is a taboo, and in mainstream medicine we are not trained to prescribe hormone therapy or to look at the health aspects of this population, which is very much neglected. We need to do more and do better!’**

Beyond this initiative, Peng has long provided mobile clinics for Rohingya and other refugee communities, organised vaccination drives for at risk groups, and facilitated health dialogues with transgender women and female sex workers.

### Championing Climate Resilient and Sustainable Healthcare

In recent years, Peng has added a new dimension to his public health leadership by advancing climate-conscious healthcare. His involvement with Health Care Without Harm Southeast Asia and the Doctor Volunteer Society reflects his growing focus on reducing hospitals’ environmental footprints and preparing for climate-related health impacts.

He first connected with Health Care Without Harm during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as Deputy Director, helped organise training in Penang that brought together engineers, clinicians and administrators to examine energy use, waste management and green building practices. One outcome was a climate impact check-up tool to assess hospital performance across energy, water, waste, and procurement.

Although his own hospital could not fully implement the tool, the training had broader influence: a participating hospital applied it rigorously, explored further innovations, and was later recognised as the Most Sustainable Hospital at the Hospital Management Asia Awards 2025—Malaysia’s first to achieve this distinction.

**‘The director attended that initial training, and it had such an impact that his hospital recently received an award from Vietnam for a green hospital—the only hospital from Malaysia to get this sustainability award. So even though my contribution was very small, it helped influence that outcome.’**

Although clinical commitments limit how extensively he can participate, he continues contributing through policy-focused work and partnerships that promote sustainable healthcare.



Peng with hospital top management and colleagues during set up for preparation to establish a COVID ward in the hospital.

## Legacy, Leadership, and Learning: Dr Wu Lien-Teh and the Values of Global Health

Peng’s interest in Dr Wu Lien Teh began in 2014 when he learned of the Penang-born physician’s Nobel Prize nomination in 1935 for his work on pneumonic plague and his discovery of the Tarbagan’s role in transmission. He was struck by Dr Wu’s determination in implementing quarantine, movement control, isolation, and mass cremation measures—actions that saved thousands of lives and foreshadowed strategies later used during COVID-19.

Inspired by Dr Wu’s courage and legacy, Peng became involved with the Dr Wu Lien Teh Society, founded by Penang Free School alumni under Dato’ Seri (Dr) Anwar Fazal. Since 2015, the Society has established several awards in Dr Wu’s name in partnership with national and international organisations.

**‘In many ways, the public health measures Dr Wu introduced more than a century ago—quarantine, movement control, isolation, and decisive leadership—echoed strongly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reminding us that while science advances, the principles of epidemic control and courage in leadership remain timeless.’**

Peng’s global health education strengthened his appreciation for systems thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration and critical inquiry. These values echo Dr Wu’s pioneering work and reinforce the idea that lasting public health progress relies not only on scientific expertise, but also on courage, leadership, and a commitment to serve humanity.

## Sustained Humanitarian Commitment: Eight Years with Médecins Sans Frontières

One of the most enduring threads in Peng’s career is his long association with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). When MSF launched its Malaysia mission around 2015 to support Rohingya refugees in Penang, Peng was among the earliest—and few long-term—volunteers. Over nearly a decade, he contributed to more than 70 weekend mobile clinics, often in informal settlements and urban slums with extremely limited access to care.

**‘The initial activity was only a mobile health clinic, weekly on the weekends. We went to the urban slums or rural areas where the refugees were located.’**

**I learned that some of the places couldn’t even be found on Waze or Google Maps—we had to rely on phone calls, landmarks, and directions.’**

These mobile clinics saw up to 150 patients per session, providing antenatal care, basic diagnostics and referrals for urgent treatment. Peng’s role in Penang’s public hospital system became pivotal: positioned between hospitals and refugee communities, he led desensitisation workshops that trained healthcare staff to treat refugees with dignity, reduce discrimination and understand provisions allowing undocumented individuals to receive emergency care without upfront payment.

**‘Refugees are still being shouted at, discriminated against, and stigmatised. I tried to bridge the gap as much as possible, but it was challenging, especially when it came to national policy on treatment fees.’**

Volunteering with MSF took place within a sensitive policy context, as Malaysia does not formally recognise refugees. As a civil servant, Peng approached this work with discretion while remaining committed to supporting vulnerable communities and contributing to MSF’s advocacy efforts. His humanitarian service drew on the global health foundations strengthened through his Commonwealth Scholarship, where training in infectious disease, equity and health system design helped him navigate the intersection of clinical need, public health priorities, and political sensitivity. Over nearly ten years, his MSF engagement demonstrated sustained, values-driven impact.

## Reaching the Unreachable: Measles Vaccination for Undocumented Children

Alongside his work with MSF, Peng plays a key leadership role in the International Dana Charity Group—first as a volunteer and now as Chief Operating Officer for its Malaysia operations. Supporting disadvantaged children across several countries, he has been central to fundraising, rural outreach, and health campaigns since 2020.

One of Dana’s major initiatives was a large scale measles vaccination drive in rural Sandakan in 2024, targeting undocumented and stateless children excluded from Malaysia’s free immunisation system and living in areas with recent outbreaks. Working discreetly with local NGOs and supportive authorities, the team raised RM19,000 for vaccines and mobilised paediatricians and nurse volunteers. Over two days, they vaccinated more than 1,000 children across multiple sites—including remote settlements and slum areas where children were found scavenging in rubbish fields—while coordinating closely with local authorities to avoid fear of enforcement.

‘One location was in a school, but even then some families worried they might be caught by the police. So we had to liaise with the local authority and stakeholders to make sure the children could come without being disturbed.’

For Peng, this work reflects the themes central to his Commonwealth Scholarship—vaccine-preventable diseases, equitable access and the humanitarian dimensions of public health. He continues to support Dana through broader operational roles, including outreach to Aborigine communities and educational initiatives such as the Brush Up project. Across these efforts, his sustained commitment stands out: whether coordinating volunteers or navigating political sensitivities, he is driven by the belief that no child should remain unseen or unreachable within the health system.

## Service, Compassion, and Dignity: Reflections from Hospice Care

Peng was introduced to community palliative care even before medical school, and it has remained an important thread in his career. In 2022, he was invited to serve as an independent non-executive director on the Board of Kasih Hospice Foundation, contributing to service development and community engagement. He recently visited its

sister organisation, Karuna Hospice in Brisbane, with President Dato’ Dr Goh Pik Pin to exchange perspectives on organisational management and service restructuring. These experiences deepened his appreciation that palliative care is not only about symptom management, but also about restoring dignity, meaning and connection at the end of life.

‘As I often reflect, end-of-life care embraces gratitude and the celebration of one’s life. Along this journey, I learnt four powerful phrases that we say far too infrequently to those we love — “I love you”, “I’m sorry”, “Thank you”, and “Please forgive me”.’

These encounters have strengthened his belief that compassionate care must remain central to medicine — a perspective further shaped by the empathy, service, and global responsibility emphasised during his Commonwealth Scholarship.

## Looking ahead: Plans for the future

Looking ahead, Peng aims to strengthen Malaysia’s health and research systems through steady, long-term contribution. Now leading a department of medicine and involved in national discussions, he plans to deepen his role in research governance, clinical trial priorities, and equitable access to care.

He also intends to continue building national research capacity through his work as a trainer in research methodology and evidence based practice, believing sustained mentorship is vital for improving research quality and supporting emerging clinicians. Alongside this, he hopes to remain active in community and humanitarian work while keeping open the possibility of pursuing a PhD. His vision centres on continuity—strengthening systems, supporting communities, and ensuring meaningful work endures beyond individual roles.

### Find out more about Chee Peng Hor’s work:

[Learn about Southeast Asia Health Care Without Harm](#)

[Discover Peng’s work with the Dr Wu Lien-Teh Society](#)

[Explore Peng’s publications](#)

[Read more about the Ivermectin efficacy study](#)

[Read more about the Favipiravir efficacy study](#)

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