

Two in one year UKZN degree student makes history



Vivek Naranbhai interacts with Bill Gates at UKZN's HPP Laboratory.

UKZN's Dr Vivek Naranbhai (22) has become the first South African medical student to graduate with an undergraduate MBChB and an honours degree in Medical Microbiology in the same year.

Dr Naranbhai finished at the top of his 2009 undergraduate class while at the same time successfully completing his honours degree during the year.

Professor Willem Sturm, Dean of the Medical School, said: "Vivek is a unique student. As a rule no student can be registered for more than one degree at the same time. He has accomplished something unique and has set a precedent.

"The result of this is that we have unofficially created a situation where top students can achieve more."

Encouraged by Dr Naranbhai's success, other top students have already approached the medical school for the same kind of opportunity and received a favorable response. Professor Sturm says there are ongoing talks of formalising an official MD-PhD program at the school.

The graduate class of 2009 excelled overall with an 85% pass rate, with many students having achieved summa cum laude and cum laude passes.

"Bored" in his first year of medical school, Dr Naranbhai found he had loads of spare time and was keen to learn more than what was offered in the undergraduate curriculum. Encouraged by the student's enthusiasm, Professor Sturm reviewed a request from Dr

Naranbhai to take up an immunology course offered in the honours program.

Usually the honours program is open only to students with a Bachelors degree, but based on his academic performance, Professor Sturm granted the request in Dr Naranbhai's second year of MBChB study.

Dr Naranbhai exceeded all expectations, completing the entire Medical MicroBiology honours program over the course of two years and winning the national Pfizer Young Health Scientist's prize in laboratory medicine for his Honours research in 2008. He then registered for his masters in immunology, in his fourth year of study, all this while completing his undergraduate studies and continuing an active research interest.

At the year-end Medical School banquet, Dr Naranbhai received a standing ovation from his peers and was later presented with the annual top student award by Professor Yacoob Seedat, honorary professor of medicine at UKZN. "I have been in association with the Medical School since 1957 and this is the first student that has distinguished himself so well, it's extraordinary," said Professor Seedat.

"Never before has a student of this medical school achieved a summa cum laude with distinction in all his subjects in undergraduate MBChB studies, obtained an honours degree, and developed a productive research interest at the same time."

Dr Naranbhai says he is proud of what he has accomplished, and hopes that his success will open a door for other students to follow. He dreams of becoming a "bench to bed-side" scientist.

"To see a patient in the morning as a physician and to work at the bench as a scientist in the afternoon, makes for effective clinical and research work." Having ventured into the unknown and returned triumphant, Dr Naranbhai sees himself playing a role in creating an MD-PhD program that the university "will have to allow".

MD-PhD programmes provide training in both medicine and research, much like what the young student has done on an unofficial basis. They are specifically designed for those who want to become research physicians. There are a few universities in countries such as the US and Germany that offer the MD-PhD over a period of eight years. No such formal program exists in SA.

The high flyer was the first MBChB student in the country to receive the annual Fogarty Ellison Fellowship in 2007– an exciting clinical research training experience previously open to qualified medical doctors only. The former Crawford – La Lucia pupil, matriculated in 2004 at the top of his class and was ranked 1st in KZN. His ambition in medical science was stimulated by parents, a biotechnology scientist and a practising paediatrician.

Dr Naranbhai has had good mentors, including researchers Professor Salim Abdool Karim of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA).

Adopted as a CAPRISA/LIFElab research fellow, Dr Naranbhai has made a great contribution to the centre's HIV research and as part of his masters programme he has in the past year worked mainly in the HIV Pathogenesis Programme (HPP) – a key research group in the Doris Duke Medical Research Institute which has played a significant role in advancing UKZN's strategic research endeavor in areas of HIV.

Dr William Carr, senior researcher and lecturer at UKZN, and research instructor at Harvard University and at the Region Institute, says he is proud of Dr Naranbhai's achievements, "Vivek has demonstrated that it is possible to combine the teachings of clinical medicine and of research into one degree. This is critical for developing a new generation of medical scientists. He has actually created the structures of a new program."

- Sejal Desai