Three months ago, this 16-year-old was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a rare type of bone cancer, in her left knee. Over the last few weeks, Chong Hui Min has been through painful ordeals like operations and chemotherapy sessions. The pain has not turned her off her childhood ambition of becoming a doctor. In fact, the experience has galvanised the Junyuan Secondary School student. She was one of the participants in Parkway East Hospital’s Medical High School, a programme which gives teenagers hands-on experience in a hospital setting. For three Saturdays from July 11, 60 students aged 15 to 18 were tutored under specialist doctors from the hospital. With the use of dummies, they learned about procedures like keyhole surgery, colonoscopy, radiology and childbirth.

Said Hui Min: “I found the experience eye-opening as I got to try all kinds of things I have never done before. And because I know how painful being a patient can be, I want to be in a position to alleviate the patients’ suffering.” Her diagnosis meant that Hui Min had to disrupt her Secondary 4 year for surgery and treatment. She will have to repeat it next year. She has had one biopsy and six chemotherapy sessions to date. She told The New Paper about the pain she went through: “For a few days after the surgery, I was wheelchair bound. But even though I didn’t use my legs, they continued to hurt.” Osteosarcoma is a type of cancer that spreads from the bone, said Dr Tan Ken Jin of the Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital. He said: “Any stage of osteosarcoma is serious. It tends to affect young people and can be life-threatening if not treated early. Bone cancer itself is quite rare, with about 10 cases in Singapore a year.”

CHEMOTHERAPY But it is the chemotherapy that takes it out of Hui Min the most. “I’d feel like vomiting for about two weeks after every single session. And there would be an aching pain in my entire body that won’t go away,” she said.

Despite undergoing chemotherapy on Tuesday, she plans on turning up at Parkway East this Saturday for the last learning session with the doctors. Her mother, Madam Jean Lee, 52, has quit her job as a tour guide to support her daughter through her treatment. But Hui Min’s parents are proud of how their daughter has matured. For instance, when Hui Min knew she was going to lose her hair to chemotherapy, she shaved off her flowing locks of hair rather than let the illness get the better of her. Her father, Mr Chong Hee Kong, 49, a trainer with a construction firm, said: “We are so proud of how resilient our daughter is and how strongly she believes in her dreams.” Hui Min said that it was a school trip to Cambodia last year that opened her eyes to the medical needs of many in the region. She said: “I saw little children with thin bodies and bloated stomachs lying on the ground but they didn’t have access to the medicines they needed. “It was the first time I saw such suffering and it impacted me.”