

A different accolade

PhD candidate **Linda Khong** decided this year to round out her education with a completely extraordinary experience.

Nearing the end of her PhD research on peer-led falls prevention education, APA Gerontological and Musculoskeletal Physiotherapist Linda Khong applied to participate in an entrepreneurial competition for Australian PhD students.

Originating in France, the 24-hour Entrepreneurship Challenge matches PhD candidates with business mentors and gives them just one day to develop a product and pitch it to investors. This year was the first time it was held in Australia.

When Linda applied, she had little idea she'd be part of the winning team out of a field of 45 individuals organised into eight teams. She simply wanted to broaden her horizons after the focused nature of a PhD.

'I thought it would be very interesting to see what other PhD candidates from other disciplines do for research. Usually if you're doing a PhD, you meet lots of people of a similar mindset,' she says.

Her team—made up of students from biology, anatomy, neuroscience and microbiology—designed a mobile application to help those travelling overseas avoid diarrhoea.

Using both easily installed software and an innovative hardware device, the product transformed the humble smart phone into a tool to detect the waterborne parasite *Giardia lamblia* that can lead to diarrhoea and an infection of the small intestine.

'You drop the water that you want to test on the phone, then the software counts the *Giardia* parasites that are present,' Linda explains.

Linda and her team—Team Guardia—spent eight hours developing the idea, which she says was the easiest part of the process. After settling on the product, they had to develop financing plans, marketing and a business model to present to the panel of judges.

However, they also took the important step of researching whether a market existed for their product by sending a survey to friends and family of two participants who, being European, knew people who were awake while the rest of Australia was sleeping.

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'The survey results showed that people were interested in the product. We included our pricing and they said they were willing to pay that price and some were willing to pay even more,' Linda says.

The team was mentored by Dr Robert Crombie, a biotechnology executive who has consulted several start-up companies. His doctorate in cancer research led to his match with Linda's group, however it was his head for business that helped the team members transform their bright idea into a viable product.

'Investors think very differently to us. Rob prompted us to think about things he knew the judges would ask us and it turned out these were the questions they asked every team,' she says.

One of these was about intellectual property, specifically whether they needed to overcome the hurdle of patented technology or whether they themselves needed to devise a plan to protect their own intellectual property. Rob also advised the team to consider an exit strategy.

'It seems funny, but you've got to think at the start what the exit strategy is,' Linda reflects.

During their pitch, they demonstrated how the software worked on a phone, as well as managing questions on exit strategy and



Linda (far right) and the rest of Team Guardia with the award for first place.

intellectual property. Importantly, they made time to throw in a few jokes. Establishing that a market existed for their innovation made their pitch stand out to the two panels of judges that assessed them through semi-finals and finals.

After 24 hours of competition, her team was announced the winner of the challenge, which gives them the chance to visit France for a two-week sponsored study tour where they will meet with researchers from top biomedical innovation incubators and start-ups.

While Linda likens the experience to popular TV show *The Shark Tank*, she can see direct links to her own and others' research in physiotherapy.

'You don't have to come up with new technology. Adapting current technology to help us get more out of rehabilitation for older people, or to minimise their risk of falling, would be fantastic.'

It was only through the support of her PhD supervisors and the University of Notre Dame that Linda was able to attend, and she is exceptionally grateful to the mentoring she received from Dr Peter Gall, of the university's Business School, prior to the competition.

Her own physiotherapy background, including working with older people through her research, also brought something unique to her team's range of communication styles and points-of-view.

'I learned quite a few things through this competition, things that I would normally not find out or learn. I picked up different perspectives of how people think and what people do, different communication skills.

'I encourage physios to apply if they have the opportunity, because I learned soft skills and hard skills,' she says.

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