CHRISTOPHER WONG could be a seriously annoying person if he wasn’t so personable, polite and humble. Calling him an overachiever is like saying Mt Everest is a small rise in the Himalayas. Wong was dux at the private school Pembroke in Year 12, studying nine subjects when all his peers were struggling to complete five. For good measure he achieved perfect 20s in eight of them, missing out in Chinese – not a language spoken at home despite his heritage – where he only managed a 19.

“It was an intellectual challenge and I would have done more if I could,” says Wong, who has just completed his medical degree. “The other aspect is that I just love to learn. I would love to do a BA (Bachelor of Arts) and a whole lot of other degrees as well, but life is short.”

Yet he has still found time to become an accomplished violinist and pianist. In September he will leave for Oxford where he will take up his studies in public health as South Australia’s latest Rhodes Scholar.

But we’re still not done. He has also run three marathons, two in Adelaide and one in London, with a best time of three hours 44 minutes.

None of this is why this 24-year-old, who only completed his university studies last year, is becoming increasingly well-known in the world of medicine.

The reason is his groundbreaking research into a potentially deadly heart condition called atrial fibrillation. The medical community has been aware of AF for a century but it has taken Wong’s investigations to uncover an alarming spike in the number of cases. AF causes the heart to beat out of rhythm which can lead to blood pooling in the muscle’s chambers, where clots can form.

Wong has collected data from every hospital in Australia and found the number of people with AF presenting to hospital has tripled over the past 15 years, even though the incidence of other forms of heart disease, such as heart failure, has stabilised. The official numbers indicate that between 2 per cent and 4 per cent of all people have AF, rising to around 10 per cent for those more than 75 years old. “Whilst we have seen this 200 per cent increase in hospitalisations for this condition, this potentially represents only the tip of the iceberg,” he says. “There is probably a larger proportion of the population who have AF but simply don’t know about it yet.”

Wong says in some people AF can be genetically related, but identifies two main reasons for the increase in cases. First, it is linked to lifestyle diseases such as obesity, hypertension and diabetes; and second, to old age. As the population becomes fatter and older, the disease becomes more prevalent.

At the moment it is possible to cure AF only if it is caught in the very early stages. But many people are not diagnosed early and this can result in significant scarring to the chambers of the heart. Often it is only discovered when a patient turns up at a hospital or their doctor complaining of racing heart palpitations or other symptoms such as tiredness. In the more extreme cases, it is only exposed after a stroke has resulted. Wong says anyone concerned that they may have the symptoms should go and see their GP.

His research has taken Wong all over the world. In Stockholm last August he addressed the European Society of Cardiologists, one of two leading gatherings of heart experts each year. The other is in America. Being asked to present there is a big deal. It’s even more of a deal to be among professors, specialists and highly experienced doctors when you are a 24-year-old medical student from the other side of the world.

Not that Wong was advertising the fact that he hadn’t even finished his medical degree while he mingled in such an esteemed company. “It wasn’t something I volunteered too often,” he admits in a slightly shabby study room at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. “There is definitely a bias against younger people doing research.”

Wong has also addressed other prestigious conferences in Boston, San Francisco and Atlanta. “Occasionally you get a medical student who presents one paper in these,” says the University of Adelaide’s chair of cardiology research, Professor Prash Sanders. “No-one has presented in all of them and no-one has presented at the level that Chris is doing. This is unheard of and he has really done it very well.”

Wong’s restless nature and a need to be always busy led him into research. While still a medical student he approached Sanders about helping out on research projects over the summer break after his first year of studies. Sanders was looking at AF and how it caused clot formations in the heart and how they can then break off, be pumped around the body and potentially cause a stroke or other complications. There had been anecdotal evidence to suggest AF was a growing problem but it was not until Wong started to delve into the records that it became obvious how large the issue was becoming.

The aim of all this research is to find a cure for atrial fibrillation. Sanders is a world-leading expert in the field and is striving to improve a potential cure which involves a procedure where a catheter is inserted into the body via keyhole surgery and used to burn parts of the heart that cause the irregularity.

Wong was born in Adelaide to parents who had come here to study from China via Malaysia. They liked Adelaide so much that they stayed once they had finished their studies. His father is a doctor and his mother a maths teacher.

In his understated manner Wong attributes his ability to shoehorn so much activity into every 24-hour period to his organisational skills. “Being busy, being productive is something I have always enjoyed,” he says. “I have been able to squeeze in enough hours on a whole heap of things.”

It was not always obvious to Wong that he was going to be a doctor. He saw the hours his father put into the job and for a while he was adamant he would not follow suit. “In a way I think I wanted to rebel a bit,” he says. “It’s funny, especially in ethnic cultures, particularly Chinese culture, it’s always expected that one tries to go into medicine or engineering or law.”

It would have been a fairly mild sort of rebellion. He thought something to do with science might be his path, but decided to give medicine one last shot and did some work experience while at school. He found he loved it.

“Looking back now I can’t imagine doing anything else so I think it was a pretty good decision.”

This year Wong will take a back seat on the research front. Last year was his last as a medical student and he now spends nine months as an intern at the RAH to qualify for his registration as a doctor. “It’s generally regarded as an incredibly busy year. You are at the bottom of the heap again,” he says.

In September he will head back to Oxford where he will spend several years studying public health policy and health economics as part of the Rhodes Scholarship. He has already done a placement at the prestigious John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford where he fell in love with the history and architecture of the ancient university town, even if he was not so fond of the winter weather.

“It was very inspiring to be studying at Oxford with the best and brightest from around the world,” he says.

Wong is still not entirely sure of his longer-term plans. He is torn between the possibilities that academe can offer, doing more research, or perhaps choosing a specialty and becoming a full-time clinician.

More likely, however, it will be a combination of everything. It’s hard to see him moving away from research now that he has seen its potential to improve lives. He says there are many medical conditions that need intensive research so that a cure can be found.

“In addition to the academic challenge that these problems present, the knowledge that the solution will help improve the lives of people is incredibly inspiring,” he says.
“I just love to learn. I would love to do a whole lot of other degrees”