

THE KNOWLEDGE BRIDGE BETWEEN GPs AND SPECIALISTS

medical Grapevine

DECEMBER 2014/JANUARY 2015

Point-of-Care Testing

As good as it gets?

Statins

Monitoring their effects

Robotics in Colorectal Surgery

A preview of the future
or a passing fad?

Hodgkin Lymphoma

An overview

Bone Marrow Transplant

The ins and outs of this
life-saving procedure

A Passion for Surgery

A conversation with Dr Cheah Yee Lee,
a Liver Transplant and
Hepatopancreatobiliary Surgeon



A Passion for Surgery

A Conversation with Dr Cheah Yee Lee, a Liver Transplant and Hepatopancreatobiliary Surgeon

by Roshini Anthony
Photos by Elmer Gono

Doctors usually cope with the emotional response to a patient's bad outcome with the help and support of their peers, nurses and ancillary staff. This is one of the benefits of the team culture which permeates most aspects of medicine and surgery.

It is not often that someone tells you that every single day on the job is a career highlight, but those are the words of Dr Cheah Yee Lee, a surgeon specialising in liver transplant and hepatopancreatobiliary surgery.

With an extensive resume that includes the Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland, the prestigious Ivy League General Surgery Residency Program at Brown University in Rhode Island, USA, where she was appointed Executive Chief Resident of General Surgery in 2008, as well as the Lahey Clinic in Massachusetts, USA, Dr Cheah followed her heart and returned to Singapore in 2010. She currently practises at the Asian American Liver Centre and also serves as an Adjunct Assistant Professor at National University Singapore.

What inspired you to pursue a career in medicine as well as specialise in liver transplant/hepatopancreatobiliary surgery?

Dr Cheah: I have always enjoyed helping people, and I like the process involved in solving diagnostic quandaries and coming up with a plan to fix problems. Coupled with a strong interest in science, medicine became an attractive career choice.

I love surgery because of the “hands-on” nature of the work involved and also because the results of surgical treatment are usually immediate and obvious. I was exposed to surgery of the liver, pancreas and bile ducts (hepatopancreatobiliary or HPB) as early as the first year of medical school and that probably encouraged my pursuit of a career in this field. I found the anatomy and pathophysiology of the organs in the right upper quadrant of the abdomen particularly challenging.

Liver transplantation is probably the most complex hepatobiliary procedure that exists, coupled with some of the most difficult peri-operative management necessary for any operation. The fact that one's life can be saved by the gift of a liver by another person is truly a medical miracle.

How would you describe a typical day at work?

Dr Cheah: Most days will involve some combination of rounding the wards, assessing patients in our clinic, discussing plans with patients and families, communicating with doctors and nurses about patient care, consulting on referrals from other physicians, attending meetings, giving presentations, auditing, and administrative work.

What are some common misconceptions about liver transplants that you've had to dispel among patients?

Dr Cheah: For a living donor liver transplant, where the living donor gives about half of his/her liver to someone who needs a liver transplantation, most people who are contemplating donation should know that the liver has the ability to regenerate, or “grow back”; both the part that remains after donation and the part that has been donated should regenerate.

With regards to donation after brain death, some people think that the donation operation may cause disfigurement but doctors maintain the utmost dignity and respect for the donor at all times; so much so, the donation operation will not interfere with funeral arrangements such as an open casket.

What are the biggest challenges you have faced in the course of your career?

Dr Cheah: A career in surgery, or medicine in general, requires a lot of hard work and perseverance, both physically and mentally. The hours are

I would like to expand the local development of HPB surgery, particularly in minimally invasive techniques, and promote a wider acceptance of liver donation and transplantation as a treatment of chronic liver disease.

long and the breaks are short. The highs (when your patient does well) are extremely rewarding but the disappointments (when they don't) can be heart-breaking.

Research has shown that 80% of female surgeons identified discrimination or gender prejudice as a major obstacle in their careers. This is because surgery has traditionally been a male-dominated field. Female surgeon mentors were difficult to find, but I was lucky to find some very strong ones, and I also had a lot of support from surgeons and staff (both male and female colleagues and superiors) who provided great encouragement.

You mentioned that your chosen profession has its highs and lows. How do you get through the negative periods?

Dr Cheah: Doctors usually cope with the emotional response to a patient's bad outcome with the help and support of their peers, nurses

and ancillary staff. This is one of the benefits of the team culture which permeates most aspects of medicine and surgery.

It is also important to analyse the case and discover areas which can be improved on, if there are any. This auditing process is not to assign blame but to learn how we can do better for the next patient.

As one of the founding members of the Hepatopancreatobiliary Association of Singapore, how would you say this Association has developed over the years?

Dr Cheah: This is an association that is still in its infancy and I think its birth was a great opportunity for HPB surgeons in Singapore to form a closer fellowship and work better together to advance the standards of HPB surgery in this country.

What would you say has been the highlight of your career thus far?

Dr Cheah: Every day at work as a HPB and liver transplant surgeon is a highlight! This work is what I love doing.

What are your current career and life goals?

Dr Cheah: I would like to expand the local development of HPB surgery, particularly in minimally invasive techniques, and promote a wider acceptance of liver donation and transplantation as a treatment of chronic liver disease.

Who are/were your role models, both career and personal?

Dr Cheah: My career role models are many and include the Irish and American surgeons who have shaped me into the surgeon that I am today, in particular the HPB and liver transplant surgeons at the Lahey Clinic, Massachusetts, USA who have shared with me their abundance of knowledge and experience, and provided great friendship and mentorship.

In Singapore, I am fortunate to work in one of the most established liver transplantation and HPB surgery programmes, with two highly respected doctors, Dr Tan Kai Chah and Dr Lee Kang Hoe.

My personal role model is my mother, a retired chemistry teacher, who once told me that "anything worth doing is worth doing well".

How do you find a way to balance your work and personal life?

Dr Cheah: This can be difficult as the work is rather demanding, but a good balance can be achieved by developing efficient time management skills. It is also important to form meaningful relationships with your family and friends outside of medicine as they can keep you grounded.



What do you do during your free time?


Dr Cheah: I learnt the piano from the age of five and throughout the years, I have had the opportunity to listen to many orchestras from Europe and North America. I am an ardent supporter of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and have enjoyed many of their performances at the Esplanade.

I also delight in the culinary mecca that is Singapore, which is so much more wonderful after years of eating Western food! I spend a lot of my free time with friends enjoying good food; my favourite local dish is chilli crab.

What is your advice for individuals who are interested in pursuing a career in your field?

Dr Cheah: A long time ago, one surgeon told me several criteria that were required of surgeons: competence, confidence and conscientiousness. I think it's important for those interested in medicine to find out exactly what our work entails and the commitment that will be required in terms of time and physical and mental effort.

If they remain interested in medicine after knowing the above, then the hard work will start from medical school and last their entire career. One of the most important skills every aspiring doctor must develop is the ability to communicate well, since this career involves a lot of interaction with different types of people, whether they are patients or colleagues. **MG**



The fact that one's life can be saved by the gift of a liver by another person is truly a medical miracle.