

SUB-SPECIALTY FOCUS: THE JOURNEY OF OPHTHALMOLOGY FELLOWSHIP— PART I



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Relentless journey the medical field is. Just when the arduous journey in masters ends and there is finally some breathing space to practice Ophthalmology on your own, another chapter unfolds—Sub-specialty in Ophthalmology! And suddenly, you begin scrutinizing and dissecting in more detail the subject you are ever so passionate about. Ophthalmology: the learning never ends.

In this part I of a 3-part series on getting the most out of the sub-specialty training, we will hear from Dr Shelina Oli Mohamed regarding the sub-specialty training program here in Malaysia. Apart from being an expert Medical Retina sub-specialist practising in Hospital Shah Alam and a renowned international speaker in her field, Dr Shelina is also the secretary of the Ophthalmology Sub-specialty Selection & Training Program for the Ministry of Health candidates.

1. How many ophthalmology sub-specialists are there in the Ministry of Health Malaysia currently and what is the demand for sub-specialists in Malaysia?

There are currently about 55 sub-specialists in various fields and the most being in the field of vitreo-retina and glaucoma.

The need for sub-specialists in the government sector is great. Ideally, our aim is to have at least one sub-specialist in each state of Malaysia especially in demanding fields such as vitreo-retina. In this way, we can reduce the waiting time for sub-specialist consultation and the burden of patients crowding one major center at any given time.

2. How many ophthalmology sub-specialty categories are there and which is the most popular among candidates and why?

Currently, there are 9 sub-specialty categories candidates can apply to:-

- Glaucoma
- Paediatrics and Strabismus
- Cornea and External Eye Diseases
- Medical Retina & Uveitis
- Vitreo-retina
- Neuro-ophthalmology
- Oculoplastic surgery
- Public Health Ophthalmology
- Comprehensive Ophthalmology

Year in year out, popular choices include vitreo-retina and medical retina while neuro-ophthalmology is the least preferred option.

3. Who can apply for sub-specialty training?

This program is open to all Ministry of Health (MOH) ophthalmologists who have completed their Masters in Ophthalmology training program. We do consider applications from ophthalmologist and lecturers attached to government universities as well.

4. What are the criteria for entering the sub-specialty program in Malaysia?

- Completion of Masters in Ophthalmology/ Parallel Program and a gazetted specialist
- Preferably with 2 years of working experience and registered with the National Specialist Registry of Malaysia
- Adequate clinical and surgical exposure

- Good recommendations from immediate supervisors
(Good surgical skills with minimal complications are also a pre-requisite for highly demanding surgical-based sub-specialties)

5. What is the process of entering the sub-specialty program ?

Firstly, candidates need to fill up the sub-specialty training form with the relevant documentation attached once the Sub-specialty/ Area of Interest advertisement is released by the Ministry of Health Malaysia. Eligible candidates will be filtered by MOH and the names forwarded to the respective Sub-specialty Training Committee. Next, candidates who fulfil the entry criteria will be called up for a face-to-face interview. After that, candidates who pass the interview will be given a sub-specialty training offer letter.

6. How many intakes are there yearly for the Sub-specialty Training Program?

There are 2 intakes; one in January and the other in July. However, the interview for both intakes is done once and the candidates who will enrol into the January or the July intake will be decided by the committee.

7. Are scholarships or financial aids provided?

Currently, all successful applicants are granted fully paid study leave for the duration of the training program. There is also a 2-3 year service bond attachment depending on whether the training is carried out locally or with a one-year overseas attachment. Additional allowances under the “Hadiah Latihan Persekutuan” may be conferred upon candidates willing to pursue training in rare fields such as neuro-ophthalmology.

8. How many candidates are enrolled into the sub-specialty program in a year?

The number of trainees taken at any given time varies greatly depending on the availability of training centres, trainers and the need for a particular sub-specialty service.

9. What is the structure of the sub-specialty program?

This is a 3-year program. The training can be completed locally or with a 1-year overseas attachment depending on the nature of the sub-specialty and the availability of overseas attachments. During the course of training,



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candidates will be required to do rotational based training at various training centres, under different trainers to make the best out of their training. The rotations are determined by the respective sub-specialty heads. Furthermore, candidates will be required to keep a logbook, perform a clinical audit and prepare a dissertation paper as part of their training program. The dissertation needs to be submitted at least 6 months prior to the training completion date.

10. What happens after completion of the sub-specialty program?

After completion, all candidates will need to report back to the Ministry of Health Malaysia and they will resume their post at the final designated centre as agreed. They will then be called upon to attend an exit face-to-face interview and viva voce with the respective sub-specialty committee and invited external examiners in the field. For surgical based sub-specialties, a video recording of their surgical skills will also be assessed. This interview is vital for a particular sub-specialty committee to determine the capability of a candidate to function independently as a sub-specialist at their final designated centre.

11. When will the candidate be conferred the sub-specialist title?

The Certificate of Completion of Training (CCT) in a particular sub-specialty will be conferred upon a candidate following a successful exit interview and unanimous decision by the sub-specialty committee.

12. What happens if the candidate fails to complete the program?

For candidates who fail to complete or decide to withdraw from the program, there will be a penalty imposed.

13. Any final advice for those who are considering to embark on this challenging journey

Sub-specialty training is another ball game altogether. Candidates need to be mentally prepared for frequent relocations as training is on a rotational basis. They will be posted to various centres around the country according to the availability of trainers. It is also essential that candidates equip themselves with basic ophthalmology knowledge and a fair amount of exposure in their field of interest so as to prepare themselves. With hard-work, dedication and perseverance, the journey will be well-rewarded.



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