

## **PERSONALITY FOCUS: DR ZABRI KAMARUDIN—THE BACKBONE OF VR SERVICES IN MALAYSIA**

### **Early Life and Background**

I was born and raised in a small "Kampung" in Perak. I consider myself very fortunate to be accepted into a boarding school in Ipoh for my secondary school years. For my SPM, I was accepted into a federal boarding school in Klang. I was very active in co-curricular activities, being an army cadet and also part of the school's basketball team.

### **What Made You Choose Medicine as a Profession?**

As a teen in the late 80s, I thought of pursuing my career as an army officer. However, we were going through a period of economic recession at that time and I had a change of heart.

I continued my studies in a one-year UKM Matriculation Program and I was seriously considering medicine after that. However, to do so, I need to get myself into the Science Faculty and compete for a place in the medical faculty. It was very tough competition. I tried various ways to get myself into medical school, including applying for the Ministry of Defence Scholarship for an Army Medical School in Turkey but I was unsuccessful. Thank heavens, my second-semester result was quite good, and I managed to secure a place in the UKM medical faculty. As everyone knows, medical undergraduate years are really tough, and I experienced it first-hand. I still managed to graduate on time, which is the happiest moment in my life.

### **Career in Ophthalmology**

After graduating from medical school, I was posted to Ipoh General Hospital. Even though life during this period was daunting physically, mentally and emotionally, it was a memorable time for me as I was surrounded by good colleagues. We encouraged each other to strive for the best in each of our rotations. Nevertheless, none of the postings piqued my interest.

I was then posted to Teluk Intan Hospital as a medical officer. At that time, I was eyeing a place in the Psychiatry Department. Alas, the department was fully occupied and the Hospital Director offered me a place in the Ophthalmology Department instead as an attachment. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it sparked my interest in this field. However, it was not easy for me, because I struggled to examine the fundus even during my medical school years and there was a lot more to learn compared to what was taught in medical school. I was initially unsure of taking up this challenge, but dived into it anyway.

Once I was in the Ophthalmology unit, I started to use the binocular indirect ophthalmoscope, and a whole new world opened up for me. It was a real eye-opener, literally. During that moment, I made up my mind to pursue Ophthalmology and I never looked back.

I then proceeded with my Masters in Ophthalmology in USM Kubang Kerian and graduated in four years. Before long, I was posted to Kuching Hospital as a Junior Ophthalmologist. There were not many Ophthalmologists in Kuching at that time, and none of us had any sub-specialty training. I was a general ophthalmologist that had to learn and perform all sorts of surgery, including trabeculectomy, dacryocystorhinostomy, squint surgery, and even corneal transplant. However, one aspect that frustrated me most was when patients needed vitrectomy surgery. I felt helpless, not knowing where or who to refer to, and clueless on what I could do to help my patients. It was then that I told myself, I must do Vitreoretinal subspecialty.

### **Journey in Vitreoretinal Training**

I was back to Peninsular Malaysia Teluk Intan Hospital after spending two years in Sarawak. I was tasked with heading the Ophthalmology Department at that time. Clinically, the same feeling of helplessness resurfaced when faced with patients with vitreoretinal conditions. At



Dr Zabri (centre) celebrating a significant milestone of Hospital Selayang's 2000<sup>th</sup> VR surgery in year 2016 with fellows and OT staff. That is about 6 VR surgeries per day, every day for the entire year!

that time, the only hospital that accepted VR referrals was Hospital Selayang. I then applied for the VR Training Program and requested to be posted to Ipoh, as I wanted to serve my home state. In the 1st year, I was trained in Alor Setar Hospital by experienced mentors and teachers.

After six months in Alor Setar, Dr Mariam (who was the Head of Service) transferred me to Hospital Selayang. I did ask her: what was her plan for me? And I remembered clearly her concise answer – she wanted me to fill the gap and eventually head the VR services later. Time has proved her right. I was a bit stressed up initially, knowing how strict Dr. Mariam is, but in the end, I am very grateful as I was trained by many experienced teachers and was exposed to all sorts of tough cases in Selayang as it was the national VR referral centre.

### **What are the Challenges in your Current Practice?**

Working in the Surgical Retina field in general and running the National Referral Centre specifically is tough. It is well-known that our VR operation list was always described as a 'no sunset' list. But I have been fortunate to work with good colleagues who are also great surgeons and staff who are understanding of the demands required of them. They (doctors and staff) have been excellent and helpful companions, and as time goes by, you would probably regard them like family, as I have with mine.

People come and go, and such is the situation with the VR surgeons in civil service. The burden of disease (and the work) increases by the year.

We have started visiting other hospitals to offer our VR services so that we reach out to the patients instead of them coming all the way to us. In this way, our services are more accessible, and we get to decongest the situation in Selayang.

**What is your view on the future of Vitreoretinal Service in Malaysia?**

My hope is that when young VR surgeons complete their training and are sent out to serve, most states in Malaysia will have at least one VR surgeon. My ultimate goal is for

everyone, whoever they may be and wherever they are, to be able to access vitreoretinal services without delay and get treatment so that we can restore or at least preserve their vision. It is not an easy task, but as the saying goes, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going". Another favourite quote of mine was inspired by an Iban warrior who once said, 'Agi Idup, Agi Ngelaban' (loosely translated to "as long as I live, I will continue to fight").



**DR CHAN JAN BOND**

Editor, MSO Express  
Consultant Ophthalmologist & Cataract  
Refractive Surgeon  
International Specialist Eye Centre (ISEC)

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