

## PERSONALITY FOCUS: PROF DR WAN HAZABBAH BIN WAN HITAM—FATHER OF NEURO-OPHTHALMOLOGY IN MALAYSIA



**Prof Dr Wan Hazabbah  
bin Wan Hitam**

### Early Life and Background

I was born at Bukit Besi, Dungun, Terengganu in 1966. I received my primary education at Sekolah Rendah Sultan Omar, Dungun, and secondary education at Sekolah Menengah Sains Sultan Mahmud (SESMA), Kuala Terengganu. I was appointed as the head boy during my secondary school. That was the time when I learnt about leadership. Later, I continued my study in medicine at Universiti Sains Malaysia and graduated as MD (USM) in 1991.

### What made you choose medicine as a profession?

My interest in medicine developed during childhood. I was born in a family with a medical background. My father was a medical assistant, and my late mother was a staff nurse. I've explored more by joining the Malaysia Red Crescent Society and was appointed as chairperson. I was also representative for National First Aid Competition for my school.

### Career in Ophthalmology

I joined the Department of Ophthalmology, Hospital USM during my medical-officership in 1993. This is the time when I started to develop my interest in ophthalmology. I was offered as a USM trainee lecturer in ophthalmology in 1994

and continued my post-graduate training at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in the same year. I completed my postgraduate training and obtained M.Surg. (Ophthal) (UKM) in 1999. I became a lecturer and ophthalmologist at the Department of Ophthalmology, School of Medical Sciences, Health Campus, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, Malaysia.



History in the making. Academic and non-academic staff of Department of Ophthalmology, School of Medical Sciences, USM 2003.

I was appointed as the head of the department from 2003 till 2013. I did my fellowship training in Neuro-ophthalmology at The Eye Institute, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Singapore in 2006-2007. I am the head of the neuro-ophthalmology service at Hospital Universiti Sains Malaysia since 2007. I became an associate professor in 2008 and was later appointed as professor in 2014. I was the first professor in ophthalmology for our department since it was established in 1993. I was then elected as a senate member of USM from 2018 till 2020. Later, I was appointed as Deputy Dean of Industry, Community Engagement and Student Affairs in 2019 till now.

### What are your achievements so far as an ophthalmologist?

The most important achievement was the establishment of the joint ophthalmology postgraduate training programme in Malaysia. The effort started in 2003 when I became the head of the department and the chairperson for the joint committee of ophthalmology. It was

a big challenge to bring the universities and Ministry of Health representatives to sit together and agree to run the same curriculum and examination for ophthalmology postgraduate training. It was a great achievement when we were able to form the Malaysia Universities Conjoint Committee of Ophthalmology and established the new curriculum in ophthalmology training in Malaysia in 2006. Later, we progressed further in organising the yearly Conjoint Ophthalmology Scientific Conference (COSC) that became a successful ophthalmology conference at the national level.



Singapore Society of Ophthalmology Named Lecture Award 2017 during APAO Congress 2017.

I have received a few international awards and recognition throughout my career. In 2008, the Japanese Neuro-ophthalmology Society (JANOS) awarded me a Tsutsui Award for my contribution to neuro-ophthalmology. I was appointed as Council Member of the Asian Neuro-ophthalmology Society (ASNOS) in 2015 till date. In 2017, I received the Name Lecture Award by the Singapore Society of Ophthalmology during APAO Conference. This year 2021, the Asia Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology awarded me the Distinguished Service Award 2020. And the latest, I received Cureus Laureate Award 2021 by The Cureus Journal of Medical Science. I hope this will inspire all our junior colleagues.

I was a former president of the Persatuan Alumni Doktor USM (PADU) and contributed a lot to my alma mater. I am also active in community work and was appointed as a chairperson for USM-Merican Community Engagement Programme for a multi-discipline health screening project that involved multi



As a chairperson for USM-Merican Community Engagement Programme – 2 buses of mobile clinic.

disciplines including ophthalmology, ORL, Family Medicine and Rehabilitation. I have initiated the establishment of the second Ronald McDonald House of Charity (RMHC) in Malaysia at Hospital USM. It is a transit home funded by RMHC for paediatric patients who received treatment at Hospital USM.



Initiated the transit home of Ronald McDonald House Charity at Hospital USM for paediatric patients and parents.

### What made you choose Ophthalmology as your passion?

Ophthalmology is a very challenging field. Although the eye is a very small organ, it is unique and very important to humans. Without the eye, you will not be able to see the world. Ophthalmology is among the medical disciplines that progress very fast in terms of microsurgery and research.

### My journey in Neuro-Ophthalmology

I did my fellowship training at TTSH Eye Institute, Singapore in 2006-2007 under Prof Dr



Goh Kong Yong. At the same time, I had an opportunity to be trained under the late Prof Dr James F Barry Cullen at Singapore National Eye Institute. Upon completion, I've started my Neuro-ophthalmology services at Hospital USM in 2007. This is the first official clinical neuro-ophthalmology service in Malaysia. I've received a lot of referrals from all over Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak. My research interest areas are optic neuropathy, visual electrophysiology, OCT and retinal imaging. With the support of my colleagues, we managed to publish more than 100 peer-reviewed articles in Neuro-ophthalmology.

of young ophthalmologists interested to choose neuro-ophthalmology as their future career. However, we must remember, the Rome Empire was not built up in one night. I can see the future of neuro-ophthalmology in Malaysia is very promising. The time will tell us.



With my main supervisor Prof Dr Goh Kong Yong and co-supervisor the late Prof Dr James F. Barry Cullen during my neuro-ophthalmology fellowship training (2006-2007)

**You are one of the pioneers in neuro-ophthalmology service in Malaysia. What were the challenges that you faced?**

Neuro-ophthalmologists often see patients with complex multi-system diseases. Cases that have been referred are challenging and not strait forwards. We must find the clue and work it out accordingly. The spectrum of neuro-ophthalmology cases in Malaysia is different compared to the Western world. The Neuro-ophthalmology subspecialty is rather new in our country. We do not have much data and publications available for our neuro-ophthalmology. It is a great challenge to me but at the same time create an opportunity to do research and review. The other challenge that I'm facing as the chief of the Neuro-ophthalmology Subspecialty Training Programme is to promote neuro-ophthalmology. Not many



Invited speaker at ASNOS Meeting 2017, Seoul, South Korea.

**What are your views on neuro-ophthalmology services in Malaysia in the future?**

Neuro-ophthalmology has a very high potential area to be developed in Malaysia. We have very low number of neuro-ophthalmologists in Southeast Asia. Our biggest challenge is to train more neuro-ophthalmologists in future to provide optimum services to our community. Neuro-ophthalmology also is a very potential area in research. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool to assist neuro-ophthalmologists in diagnosing and managing patients in future. AI algorithms have shown high accuracy in detecting papilloedema and other neuro-ophthalmology diseases.



**DR CHAN JAN BOND**

Consultant Ophthalmologist & Cataract Refractive Surgeon  
International Specialist Eye Centre (ISEC)