

## Championing Ophthalmology Care in The Rural Districts

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Dr. Tiong Tung Hui is one of the first fully trained eye surgeons in Sarawak, backed by his extensive experience in general comprehensive ophthalmology. After graduating from University of Malaya in 1980, Dr. Tiong came to Sarawak as a house officer and was posted at the district.

“I wanted to go for post graduate training but during those days, it was really tough in view of limited opportunities given to very few people,” he said.

His earlier intention was to specialize in general surgery but later, in view of the very sparse number of ophthalmology specialists in the district, he chose to pursue ophthalmology. There were only three medical officers in the district in 1981 and 1982.

The primary motivating force for him to pursue ophthalmology was the late Dato Dr. S. Selvarajah, who was head of Department at Kuala Lumpur General Hospital. Dr. Tiong attributes a large part of his choice of ophthalmology as a career to Dr. Selvarajah, who he sees as a father figure and mentor in view of his valuable guidance throughout his career.

Speaking about the difficulties and challenges in this career, Dr. Tiong shared that his career in ophthalmology started when he came to Kuala Lumpur. The first three months after coming to Kuala Lumpur were a struggle. The unrelenting encouragement by Dr. Selvarajah was the major driving force that kept Dr. Tiong motivated to walk through every struggle. After about 1.5 years of practicing in Kuala Lumpur, he took leave and went to the UK for one year. After coming back from the UK, he served as a clinical specialist at Kuala Lumpur before he came back to Kuching.

When asked about the challenges he faced in his career, Dr. Tiong mentioned that when he came back to Sarawak in 1987, there were still very few ophthalmologists in the area. The eye department of the hospital where Dr. Tiong practiced did not even have a single medical officer. Dr. Tiong along with his medical assistant were the only two people who ran the ophthalmology department. The tremendous workload during those days can be judged from the fact that on an average, about 150 patients were seen by Dr. Tiong every day at the outpatient clinic.

The proud achievements by Dr. Tiong included the introduction of the intraocular lens implant in Sarawak and also pioneering the free cataract operation in the district hospital to cater to the needs of the weaker sections of society. Their initiatives were supported by the Lion's Club and the Rotary Club.

Throwing light on the challenges in his practice, he mentioned that he encounters patients coming in to see him at a very advanced stage of the disease.

“There were patients who had eye tumors and they came to see me only when the whole eye was protruding out,” he said. “Some of the patients were already blind before they came.”

This only added to the challenges in dealing with a particular disease. He mentioned that there are so many less-privileged people who are in need of sub-specialty care but are unable to access that due to costs involved in going to Kuala Lumpur.

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**Dr. Tiong Tung Hui**



“The greatest thing that has happened in Sarawak is that now we have a good number of ophthalmologists,” Dr. Tiong said. “There was a time when we had only one or two ophthalmologists to cater to the whole area but now we have an ophthalmologist in every major town. To me, that is probably the biggest development. Thanks to the government, we now have an eye department in almost all the general hospitals and major district hospitals.”

Speaking about the work-life balance, he said having a spouse who is also in the medical field has added to his support system in terms of family life. Apart from his contributions in ophthalmology, he participates in a program that takes care of terminally-ill cancer patients.

To aspiring ophthalmologists, Dr. Tiong says: “If we have determination, we can really bring a change. There is a great need of ophthalmology care in the outskirts and smaller towns. It would be a great move for aspiring ophthalmologists to provide their services in such areas instead of the main city.”