

## PERSONALITY FOCUS



### **PROFESSOR DR. LIZA SHARMINI AHMAD TAJUDIN**

Professor of Ophthalmology & Senior  
Consultant Ophthalmologist (Glaucoma)

#### **General**

Born in Kuala Terengganu, raised in Perak and Kuala Lumpur, Professor Dr. Liza went to a few schools for primary education. This was simply because her father travelled a lot for work and the family decided to follow him. She then went to a boarding school in Taiping, Perak for her secondary education.

Professor Dr. Liza graduated with an MBBS degree from Universiti Malaya (UM) in 1994. She then completed her specialist training in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and subsequently obtained her PhD from University College London, United Kingdom (UK).

Professor Dr. Liza likes all kinds of laksa and desserts of all sorts. She loves cooking and baking, and she used to stuff her children

whenever she cooked or baked. However, she doesn't cook or bake that much now as her children are all grown up (aged 22, 21 and 16, respectively) and they are not home all the time to finish the cakes that she baked or dishes that she cooks.

Because she can't bake or cook that much anymore, Professor Dr. Liza started enjoying travelling. To date, she has visited over 20 countries for either work or leisure. Some of the countries that she has visited so far include China, Japan, Taiwan, India, Australia, Egypt, and many more. She also shared that she will visit Barcelona and Florence this year.

Professor Dr. Liza is a book worm too and she reads all genres of books. Her favorites are novels by Jeffrey Archer and series by Robert Langdon. She is currently reading *If Tomorrow Comes* by Sidney Sheldon. It is an old book that was first published in 1980. She found it at one of the Big Bad Wolf Book Fairs. She loves the character of Tracy in the book because she is practical, determined and fun. "*Revenge can be very sweet and dangerous*" – this is Professor Dr. Liza's thought of the book so far.

Professor Dr. Liza definition of a work-life balance is "when you are happy at work and life, and your loved ones are as happy as you are". She shared that she is 'almost' a perfectionist. She used to be a real one before she got hitched. To her, balancing between work and family is very important in order to be 'perfect' in both worlds. Multitasking and work smart concept help her in



organizing her life and juggling between work and family. She also shared that working in a small city like Kota Bharu is another plus point. Without the hectic life in a typical city, she has more time to spend with her children, without neglecting her clinical practice and academic work.

### Work

Professor Dr. Liza first started practicing as an ophthalmologist in 2002, after graduating from Master of Medicine (Ophthalmology). Her top three specialties during her final year as a medical student were obstetrics and gynecology (O&G), pediatrics and ophthalmology. She decided to choose ophthalmology because she had to think for her family as well as considering job satisfaction. The first two choices were out of the picture to balance her husband's plan to be a paediatrician. Even though being an ophthalmologist was her third choice but it turned out to be the best choice for her and she has never regretted it.

What Professor Dr. Liza enjoys the most as an ophthalmologist is the combination of the excitement of surgery and the mystery of medicine. She said that it remains gratifying to see a smile on a patient's face who just underwent a cataract operation or a relief smile from a patient post a successful glaucoma surgery.

In Professor Dr. Liza's opinion, some of the challenges being an ophthalmologist in Malaysia include the lack of awareness on the importance of eye care, administrative red tape and poor

coordination between relevant agencies or institutions.

Currently, there are 24 ophthalmologists in Kelantan, with nine of them in KKM, 11 in USM and four in the private practice. The top three eye conditions treated in Kota Bharu are cataract, diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma. The awareness level of glaucoma is still low but compared to last 15 years, it has improved, with the initiation of the World Glaucoma Week Screening and local community eye service.

The local community eye service is a free eye screening programme that involves undergraduate and post-graduate students. The programme was conducted at 12 to 15 areas in Kelantan. Not just that, Professor Dr. Liza and team has also initiated a glaucoma screening clinic for high risk patients, especially juvenile onset open angle glaucoma.

When asked about her decision to move to Kota Bharu, Professor Dr. Liza shared that the plan started with an offer that her husband received – to work in USM and pursue his dream to be a paediatrician. Upon the completion of her housemanship, she followed him to Kota Bharu and worked in Hospital Raja Perempuan Zainab II. At the same time, she was also accepted as a trainee lecturer in USM – when the university started its master program in ophthalmology in 1997. She has been living in Kota Bharu for the past 22 years.

Professor Dr. Liza would like to see the formation of Institute of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences in the next five years. It has been her dream to



have such institute to be at par as other developed countries. She shared that the Department of Ophthalmology at USM has teamed up and worked cohesively to lay a strong foundation in research related to ophthalmology and the next step will be none other than the formation of an institute.

Talking about the overall ophthalmology field, compared to other countries, Professor Dr. Liza feels that we are still at the stage of blooming (early bloom). In her opinion, we have learnt from others but she is sure that we will progress faster, with a good direction.

We asked her about her proudest moment being an ophthalmologist. In spite of having two papers in Nature Genetics (high impact journal), her paper (among her first publications) on ocular manifestation in Down Syndrome published in the Singapore Medical Journal is the one she is proud of. It was just a simple idea that popped up while examining a Down Syndrome child (the clinical research question was why she had never seen Brushfield spots in patients) that materialized into a research work and published in a reputable journal. It was cited by more than 60 other papers. She never expected such a simple question to provide such an impact to the scientific community!

We also asked her about her opinion on how do we encourage more medical students to specialize in this field. In her opinion, we need to instill the interest during the undergraduate posting and make ophthalmology posting a fun and memorable rotation in spite of short

duration of time (2 to 3 weeks in most universities in Malaysia).

Not just that, she also shared her thoughts on how we can improve the awareness level of this field. In her opinion, the awareness should be initiated among the public and enhanced among primary and secondary eye care level. Community engagement is the way forward in initiating and sustaining public awareness programmes. She also highlighted that there is no single health campaign on ocular diseases in multimedia, especially television until now in Malaysia.

Professor Dr. Liza's advice to medical students and practitioners who are new to the field is "be focused, be brave but cautious – always remember you need to learn, re-learn and un-learn through-out your career". Not just that, apart from providing excellent clinical service, "generating new knowledge through research is also important to improve your clinical service (action research: bedside-bench-bedside) and to put Malaysia as the 'authority' in ophthalmology especially in South East Asia".