



GolinHarris

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THE WEEK OF MARCH 17, 2008

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Wine with a bang
A bottle of bubbly at auction is within reach

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Finding one's gastronomical muse at a museum

The GOOD DOCTOR

Dr Susan Lim on her ongoing work in adult stem cell research



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 THE ASCOTT INTERVIEW

The GOOD DOCTOR

In 1990, she performed the first liver transplant; today, Dr Susan Lim's work in adult stem cell research has won her an award. **Felix Cheong** catches up with Dr Lim to find out what her plans are for her ongoing research.



SARIE LIM/STYLING: EDDY SINGAPORE



She may be soft-spoken, gentle — nay, genteel — in her manner. All-Asian feminine poise as she brushes her jet-black hair back, smiling. But there's a determined edge in her voice and clarity of purpose in her eyes.

That's how Dr Susan Lim strikes you as she welcomes you into her office, which is decked out in fuss-free, minimalist style, at Mount Elizabeth Hospital. The 52-year-old, who also runs another practice at Gleaneagles Hospital, is one of the most respected physicians and researchers in her field. After all, her name is in the record books as the first surgeon in Asia to have performed a successful liver transplant in 1990. And her arm-long list of achievements doesn't stop there.

Even as a medical student, Lim had been winning scholarships and prizes, almost at will. Between 1974 and 1979, for instance, the alumna of Singapore Chinese Girls' School studied medicine at Monash University in Melbourne under a Colombo Plan scholarship. She graduated with first-class honours, picking up the David Rosenthal Memorial Prize for the highest aggregate marks in her pre-clinical years.

In 1984, Lim obtained her Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh as well as the G B Ong Gold Medal for being the most outstanding candidate in general surgery that year. Subsequently, she was awarded the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, Master of Medicine from the National University of Singapore (NUS), Fellow of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore and Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, the US.

Following her surgical degree, Lim received another prestigious award, the Winston Churchill Scholarship, to undertake a PhD in transplantation immunology at Cambridge University from 1985 to 1988. During her time there, she held a string of awards and prizes, including an Ethicon Travelling Scholarship to Minneapolis, the US to understudy islet cell transplantation and participate in the human pancreas transplant programme.

After six years in Australia and four in the UK and the US, Lim returned to Singapore in 1990 to assume the position of senior lecturer and consultant in surgery at the National University Hospital. The following year, at 36, she rose to the position of associate professor in surgery.

Between 1990 and 1995, she was the principal investigator of a National Science and Technology Board-funded pioneering research project on islet cell transplantation from tissue derived from human foetal pancreases. In 2003, she founded Stem Cell Technologies to conduct research in adult stem cells for cell therapy. The company has since entered into collaboration with NUS to carry out research for a cure for diabetes, using adult stem cells.

Lim's latest honour is an award named after her: the Dr Susan Lim Award for Advancement in Laparoscopic and Minimally Invasive Surgery, which is given out by the American Academy of Continuing Medical Education. This is the first time the academy, whose job is to set the standard for training courses for doctors and accredits medical training bodies, has named an award after a doctor. It was presented to two recipients at the Arab Health 2008 conference in Dubai. *Op-*



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tions catches up with Lim in a 45-minute chat at her office.

How does it feel to have an award named after you?

I feel very honoured and privileged. More importantly, the fact they've chosen a Singaporean makes me proud because, today, Singapore is pitching itself as a centre of excellence. It's very competitive now, with Thailand, Malaysia and the Middle East rising fast. This recognition plugs us into the system. It also helps with medical tourism. Patients will certainly check out cities whose doctors have been featured in the news.

At my age, it's not about myself anymore. It's about what I can give back to the country. I was born and bred here. I do voluntary service in the army. I was a Colombo Plan scholar. I owe a lot to society.

Specifically, why do you think they chose to name the award after you?

In 2006 and 2007, I had won the award. In 2006, when they thrust the award in my hands, they said: 'Dr Lim, you've spoken on stem cell and robotics. That's cutting-edge stuff.' They felt I had spoken with passion and commitment.

Stem cell, of course, is a sexy subject these days. For me, I have a biotechnology company, which researches into stem cell, in collaboration with the university. We've been in it since 2003. We champion an aspect of stem cell that appeals to the Middle East because it's not the controversial embryonic stem cell. What I'm looking at are cells taken from ourselves to treat ourselves.

When I decided to embark on stem cell research, everyone else was into embryonic stem cell. Singapore had then put a lot of money into it. At that time, it was widely believed that only embryonic stem cells could truly turn into a whole variety of cells. I decided that wasn't the way to go. If you burn yourself, your skin grows back naturally. And if you have chemotherapy, your hair falls but it grows back. So, there must be some stem activity. But I faced criticisms from colleagues who said I was wasting my time.

But today, the movement has swung. It seems like adult stem cell is going to make it to the finishing line. We clinicians feel there's no point in doing research if we can't realise [the results] in our lifetime. We want to do research that can do something for our patients right now,

It was tempting to stay there. I like the sea and everything that Australia can offer me. But it never once crossed my mind to jump the bond or live overseas for good. I felt my calling was to bring back the technology and be one of the building blocks of Singapore. — Lim

not something that will only work in the next century.

Was your decision to embark on adult stem cell research made to circumvent ethical issues?

Yes. I'm a practical person. If I'm going to embark on research, using my money and that of donors as well as the university's infrastructure, I want to be sure it'll end up with something practical. From day one, I did not like the idea of embryonic stem cell research, for religious and moral reasons. From a scientific viewpoint, what really alarmed me is that embryonic stem cells can infinitely divide, you can't stop them turning into cancer.

Adult stem cells, on the other hand, are further along the route of being differentiated. They've made up their mind what they're going to be. They don't have a limitless number of divisions. It's for this reason scientists don't like adult stem cells.

It's interesting that you described yourself as 'practical'. That's very Singaporean, no?

Very much, even though I had spent a lot of time abroad studying. I couldn't have gone into a more radical university than Monash at that time. In year one, for example, we did a subject called human sexuality and we were taken to watch porn movies! The idea was for us, as doctors, to be able to understand these things.

I had a very strict upbringing, actually. I remember my dad would follow me to parties when I was 15. He'd be parked outside, waiting for me to finish my party!

Given that kind of freedom abroad, why did you choose to return home?

It was tempting to stay there. I love the outdoors, the freedom. My time is precious. I'd go skiing three to four times a year. I like the sea and everything that

Australia can offer me. But it never once crossed my mind to jump the bond or live overseas for good. I felt my calling was to bring back the technology and be one of the building blocks of Singapore.

Is there a lot of professional jealousy in your field?

I think there always is. But when you're a student — and this is why I like being a student! — you don't have enemies. My professor once said to me, when I left Cambridge: 'Susan, you'll know you're successful when you've developed enemies.'

So, now that you're so accomplished, what's your experience with professional enemies?

I think it's human nature to be envious. Even today, I'm envious of some people too. I don't think it's a fault. It's simply a reaction. But I, in my own mind, know I don't have any enemies. I'm sure a lot of people may not like me but I can live with that!

Why didn't you continue a career in academia rather than set up your own practice?

When I came back to Singapore, I was so excited. I had already spent a lot of time doing transplant immunology. But the first thing that was thrown upon me, that gave me a lot of pressure, was to start liver transplantation. I rose to the occasion because I realised I was the only one who had done 200 to 300 liver transplants in Cambridge. And my professors here had been busy trying to start the programme but all they had done were transplants in pigs.

So, I spent almost half a year — and got a lot of white hairs as a result of that! — trying to, one, perfect the technique and train the team; and, two, raise the money, which wasn't what I was trained to do! I

ended up raising money from my Mom's mahjong friends. Dr Goh Keng Swee was very supportive too, with the Singapore Turf Club contributing funds. And, today, the money's still in the NUS fund. I'm pleased with that.

Money aside, I remember it was a stressful time because I also had to convince the patient: I'd never done such an operation in Singapore before but please risk your life with me! She was a good patient, though. She was 18 and didn't have long to live, only three to six months. She had family members from [Kuala Lumpur] and they were trusting. I felt I couldn't let them down.

When you're young, as I was then, your personality is to challenge. The operation itself didn't worry me so much. As long as I know I have the skills and training and I believe I can do it, I'll go ahead. Still, it was nerve-racking because you had the TV cameras and all eyes were on you.

Well, the patient is alive and well today. I'm godmother to her son. My husband and I run a small charity organisation called Indiapore Trust. When we married — my second marriage, he's Indian and I'm Singaporean, so we called it Indiapore! — we put a small amount of money into it and that's helped to support the boy's education.

When I started liver transplants, I was sent to harvest organs in all situations, including prisons. I'm not sure if you can imagine that! As a doctor, a body is a body but I have a lot of respect for it. If I take out an organ, I make sure I'm there to close the body, in a way that I'd like to be closed myself. I have empathy and compassion for all my patients, alive or dead. I felt this wasn't the way science was to go, to take organs from individuals. It cannot be correct. That was the start of my interest in stem cell research.

In the university, you have to — especially as an associate professor — spend a third of your time in teaching, a third in research and a third in clinical work. A third here and a third there means so little time. You can't make anything work. Today, I still think: Choose either teaching or research. So, I came out of the university, because I couldn't find the formula that works. At the end of the day, I also like my interactions with my patients. I'm a people person. ■

Felix Cheong is a published author and poet