

Sound support

When doctors are able to help the deaf to hear, they also prevent a life of social isolation for these patients

●●● BY SOLE SOLOMON

THE MAN thought he would never be able to hear again after a viral infection caused him to become deaf. He became frustrated and withdrawn when he couldn't communicate properly with his family and friends. Then, a cochlear implant helped restore his hearing – and a dramatic change came over him.

It was this kind of transformation in people that ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeon Dr Barrie Tan wanted to see when he decided to specialise in hearing as a young medical officer. "I really feel that (this sub-specialty of otolaryngology) can make a big difference."

He recalled a story the patient told him. "He was at a coffee shop. The coffee shop attendant was very curious about his cochlear implant. My patient told him: 'This is the latest radio, don't you know?'"

This is my radio receiver so I can hear my radio through here.'

"My patient was very proud of his cochlear implant, and he was able to joke about it. Basically, he was just very happy to be able to interact with people again," said Dr Tan, Head, Department of Otolaryngology, Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

Adults who have lost their hearing or who are struggling to hear can feel isolated socially. "Unlike children who were born deaf, these adults know what it's like to be able to hear. So it's very frustrating when they lose that, and to give them their hearing back and see their joy – that's very meaningful to me," he added. "It's a personal sense of gratification from having helped restore something that was broken. I think that's very precious."



▲ Dr Barrie Tan hopes that Singapore will have an ENT (ear, nose and throat) national centre in the future as such a facility will help bring together resources for ENT clinical care and research.

While the decision to specialise in ENT came during his training, the inspiration to enter the field of medicine came earlier. Dr Tan's father is a retired ophthalmologist and it was at his clinic that Dr Tan, as a child, would often see patients leave the clinic happy after their eye bandages came off.



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DR BARRIE TAN, HEAD, DEPARTMENT OF OTOLARYNGOLOGY, SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL, ON WHY ADULTS WHO HAVE LOST THEIR HEARING OR ARE STRUGGLING TO HEAR CAN FEEL ISOLATED SOCIALLY

His father supported his decision to join the medical fraternity, but not his mother. "She had seen how gruelling my father's earlier days in medicine were, and she didn't want her children to go through that as well.

"Little did she know that all three of her children were quite set on becoming doctors," he said. Dr Tan's brother is a urologist while his sister is a general practitioner.

As the head of his department and Director of SGH's Centre for Hearing and Ear Implants, Dr Tan wants his team to have work-life balance.

"I want everyone to be happy and not to be burnt out," he said. Dedication to work and patients is important, but being able to function effectively is also crucial if the team is to take care of their patients properly.

"I try to get the department to go out together so we have time off from our clinical work, and we get to know each other more as friends and family," he said.

"I believe that a family that eats together sticks together."

The former President's Scholar keeps a busy schedule. In addition to his clinical work, he also trains young doctors as Director of the SingHealth Otolaryngology Residency Program. He still finds time to volunteer for overseas medical missions as he doesn't want "to take for granted what I've been given, and to ensure that I don't lose sight of why I entered medicine in the first place, which was to help people most in need. These are people who otherwise have no means of accessing specialist help."

Dr Tan doesn't forget his family either, making jogging, swimming and visiting parks his hobbies so that he can enjoy these activities with his young daughter and son. He has also picked up photography, as a result.

High on his priorities, though, is his work in ENT. "We are in the era of super specialists. So I would like each ENT specialist to find the sub-specialty that he enjoys, and go for the best training he can possibly afford, in terms of personal time as well as money. And then to come back with those skills and further develop ENT in Singapore."

Dr Tan hopes that Singapore will have an ENT national centre in the future, as such a facility will bring similar minds together and help harness resources for ENT clinical care and research.

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