

A Balancing Act

How oculoplastic surgeon Dr. Livia Teo successfully juggles her busy practice, young family and eye care education

by Chow Ee-Tan

Dr. Livia Teo's passion for oculoplastics stems from its unique blend of functional and aesthetic aspects, which allows her to offer comprehensive eye care to a diverse range of patients. In an exclusive interview with CAKE Magazine, the petite doctor opened up about the setbacks she faced in medical school, the challenges in her career and the rewarding experiences of balancing her thriving practice and young family – all while remaining dedicated to eye care education.

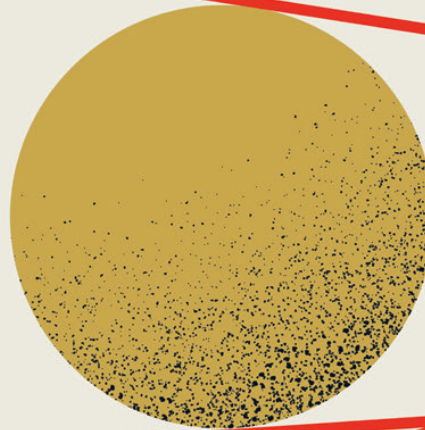
Dr. Livia Teo, senior consultant ophthalmologist at Gleneagles Hospital in Singapore, stumbled upon the field of oculoplastics while she was training to be an ophthalmologist at the Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC) and assisting in the plastic surgery department there.

"I came to realize through my mentors that there was a field in ophthalmology called oculoplastics, and that subspecialty is the perfect combination of ophthalmology and plastic surgery. That was when I decided to embark on a career in ophthalmology and worked towards joining the oculoplastics fraternity," enthused Dr. Teo.

From fascination to passion

She realized her dream and today, she is practicing as a fellowship-trained oculoplastic surgeon and runs a private practice at Nobel Eye and Vision Centre located within Gleneagles Hospital.

"I chose to do oculoplastics as it is the only subspecialty in ophthalmology that allows me to achieve both functional and aesthetic aspects of a patient's eye condition," she said, adding that many of the conditions span both adult and pediatric age groups, and Dr. Teo also has a special interest in pediatric oculoplastic cases.



According to Dr. Teo, there are various eye conditions with a wide range of surgeries to manage, including eyelid, orbital, and lacrimal conditions. Many of these conditions span both adult and pediatric age groups. Dr. Teo also has a special interest in pediatric oculoplastic cases.

"For instance, if they are tearing, I could offer them tear duct surgery to relieve any blockage. If they had cataracts, I could restore their vision through cataract surgery. And if they complain of droopy eyelids affecting their vision, I can further improve their vision or appearance through lid surgery," she continued.

It runs in the family

Born in Singapore to parents who were from Malaysia, Dr. Teo completed her undergraduate studies at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore. She then trained at SNEC for her ophthalmology postgraduate residency training and further subspecialized in oculoplastics at Severance Hospital (Yonsei University, South Korea), and Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, (Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts).

Dr. Teo shared that her career choice was inspired by her father, an obstetrician and gynecologist.

"I was greatly influenced by his passion and dedication to his work," she said. "He would always share the rewarding aspects of medicine with me — about making his patients feel better and the joy of bringing life into the world when he delivers babies. He inspired me to enter medical school, and I haven't looked back since."

Dr. Teo had always been a high achiever in her academic journey and received training from many prestigious institutions. However, she admits that there have been setbacks along the way.

"I chose to do oculoplastics as it is the only subspecialty in ophthalmology that allows me to achieve both functional and aesthetic aspects of a patient's eye condition."

"I failed one of my exams in the middle of my residency training and I started questioning myself if I had chosen the right path. I even considered if I should give up ophthalmology," she recalled.

Thankfully, she had the support of her fiancé (now her husband) and wonderful parents, who helped her work through that challenging time.

Dr. Teo has always been passionate about education, having been influenced by her mother, a former teacher.

When she was working full-time in the restructured hospital in Singapore, she served as the program director of the SingHealth Ophthalmology Residency Program. Even after setting up her own private practice, Dr. Teo remains committed to teaching as a visiting consultant at the National University Hospital.

"Teaching allows me to get to know the younger generation, understand their challenges, and share my clinical experience with them," she happily shared. "I am also very enthusiastic about public education on eye health and eye care. There are so many eye diseases that are detectable and treatable in the early stages. I believe that everyone should have access to this information and should be entitled to the opportunity to have their eyes screened. This will allow us to work towards the prevention of blindness," she added.

Career highlights and challenges

One of the highlights of her career is running her own practice

and successfully managing a great team of staff.

"My team is like my second family! It has been great working with like-minded individuals who do [their] best to give the patient a good experience when they come to see us. It also allows me to fulfill my dream of reaching out to patients and their family members, and educating and empowering them to take care of their eye health," shared Dr. Teo.

With her accomplishments and dedication, Dr. Teo has received several accolades from the industry over the last decade. The award that is most meaningful to her is the SingHealth Service Star she received in 2018.

"It is awarded to individuals based on positive feedback and compliments from patients. It meant a lot to me to receive it as it felt like a shared gift from my patients for taking care of them. It brings me great joy to be able to help them to see better and feel better about themselves," she shared.

However, it wasn't always smooth sailing in her practice, as she faced various challenges along the way.

"As a petite female, I often meet patients who feel that I might not be able to perform the necessary surgery or meet their expectations. Some would comment that I look too young to be a specialist or that I just graduated from university and might lack the necessary experience. I still receive comments like these, even after I have been an ophthalmologist for more than 10 years," she laughed.

Dr. Teo would usually take time to explain to patients their conditions and the surgeries necessary, often showing them videos of her past surgeries and their results to help patients understand.



"They are usually convinced thereafter that I can do the job. I believe a good rapport and trust from the patient is of utmost importance in a doctor-patient relationship," she shared.

Balancing work and family life

Dr. Teo is married to a vitreoretinal surgeon, whom she met during her first year as a medical officer in the ophthalmology department of SNEC. They have been happily married for 15 years now and have two beautiful daughters, aged six and three.

"My husband has been my pillar of strength throughout my career. There were many points when I doubted myself, but he always believed in me and would support me through the toughest times," shared Dr. Teo. "He is quieter and more reserved compared to my chatty and bubbly self. I am the emotional half, and he is my rational and intelligent better half. I would like to think we complement each other well."

Being a mother of two young children while successfully managing a thriving career is Dr. Teo's most significant achievement to date. "It's always difficult trying to find that work-life balance. Running my own practice means I have clinics and surgeries from Monday to Saturday. I have to actively find pockets of time to spend with the kids," she noted.

Dr. Teo makes the effort to send her daughters to school every day and occasionally drops by the playground

on the way to school. She always tries to make it home for bedtime to tuck the kids into bed, and they would exchange stories about the day.

"Now that I have my own practice and a more flexible schedule, I make it a point to block my schedule to attend my children's school performances and gatherings. I always have to rush to catch up on work before and after, but the effort is so worth it when I see their little faces light up when I show up," she happily shared.

A rewarding learning journey

Dr. Teo is indebted to the many great mentors and teachers who inspired and motivated her throughout her career.

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of Health Manpower Development Program Scholarship. And I am still learning every day," she said.

Dr. Teo pays tribute to an outstanding mentor, Prof. Barry Cullen, who taught neuro-ophthalmology at SNEC until his retirement in 2015 when he was 87.

"He was approachable and well-loved by the doctors, nurses, and allied health in the Singapore ophthalmology scene. He loved

teaching and would make the effort to hold tutorials for all the residents to prepare us for the examinations. Sadly, he passed away in 2020. It was an honor and privilege to have crossed paths with him. It was a lifelong calling for him to contribute to the community, and I aspire to have the same passion that he had," Dr. Teo concluded. 🙏



Contributing Doctor

Dr. Livia Teo is a senior consultant ophthalmologist at Gleneagles Hospital. Before joining Nobel Eye and Vision Centre, she was a senior consultant at the Singapore National Eye Centre with more than 15 years of experience. She graduated from the National University of Singapore on the Dean's list and was awarded Book Prizes in surgery and dermatology. She obtained Fellowships from The Royal College of Surgeons (Edinburgh) and the Academy of Medicine (Singapore), securing Gold Medals as the top candidate in Oculoplastic & Adnexal Disease as well as Corneal & Refractive Surgery. Being granted a Ministry of Health HMDP postgraduate scholarship, she further advanced her training and completed fellowships at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, Harvard Medical School, and Severance Hospital, Yonsei University in Seoul. Committed to mentoring the next generation of ophthalmologists, she served as the Program Director of the Ophthalmology Training Program in SingHealth and won the Best Teaching Faculty Award in 2019 and 2016. Dr. Teo is a member of the Singapore Medical Association, Singapore Society of Ophthalmologists, and Association of Women Doctors, and is a council member of the Singapore Society of Ophthalmic Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. She has expertise in managing a range of eye conditions and has a special interest in pediatric and adult ptosis and related eyelid conditions, ophthalmic plastic, and reconstructive surgery of the face and orbits.

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