



Carving a Clear Sightline

Prof. Dr. Gemmy Cheung aims to bring women ophthalmologists to the forefront

by Chow Ee-Tan

Prof. Dr. Gemmy Cheung is the Congress President of the upcoming Asia-Pacific Vitreo-retina Society Congress in 2024 and an esteemed figure in ophthalmology, is dedicated to mentoring and creating an inclusive environment for young women in the field. She not only serves as a mentor for aspiring ophthalmologists but also actively supports international fellowships to strengthen training opportunities for ophthalmologists from developing countries.

Renowned in the fields of ophthalmology and vitreo-retinal surgery, Prof. Dr. Gemmy Cheung is currently the Arthur Lim Professor in Ophthalmology at the Duke-NUS Medical School, National University of Singapore. An accomplished retina specialist and the Congress President of the APVRS Congress in 2024, Prof. Cheung is dedicated to mentoring and providing an inclusive environment for young women ophthalmologists across the region.

In her capacity as head of the Medical Retina Department at the Singapore National Eye Centre, as well as head of the Retinal Research Group at the Singapore Eye Research Institute, Prof. Cheung has established a vibrant platform for exchanges between scientists and clinicians and has opened up abundant training opportunities for fellows, researchers and Ph.D. students.

"I believe that training and role modeling are very important for continuing to encourage the development of women in ophthalmology," Prof. Cheung said



in an interview with PIE magazine. "It is not that long ago that we had the first woman ophthalmologist, and today we witness a substantial representation of young women in medical school, graduating from medical school and entering residency in ophthalmology."

Improving opportunities for women ophthalmologists

Over the years, Prof. Cheung has had the opportunity to train several fellows from Dubai, India, Myanmar, the Philippines, Malaysia, as well as China, where the local training system is probably not as well-established as in Europe or Singapore.

She said it is much harder for these women ophthalmologists to find the right attachment for a training program, which can help them progress from year one to year five of their ophthalmology training in a very structured way.

"I find it extremely humbling to see the determination of these young women who go overseas to look for opportunities to advance themselves. That spirit is really important and we need to encourage that," she continued.

Prof. Cheung believes ophthalmologists from Singapore and other developed countries should support international fellowships, such as the Asia Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology and the Fred Hollows Foundation. This support aims to help ophthalmologist trainees from developing countries obtain training in places with a more established system.

"This kind of scheme is important for both genders. But returning to the topic of women, I would encourage them to seize this opportunity as this would be a very good opportunity for them to broaden their horizon, meet new people, and, in turn, build up their confidence," she continued.

"In fact, we can start by organizing efforts among local trainees in our department, extending these initiatives to international platforms, to build up a network for women at various stages of their careers, whether it is in training or beyond," she added.

She highlighted one of the challenges faced by many talented young women ophthalmologists when it is time to start looking after their families. The majority often opt for part-time career involvement because of family responsibilities, inevitably leading to a delay in their career progression.

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"So, I think we need to look into how we can support these women ophthalmologists during this phase and encourage them to return to full-time roles once their children have grown up," Prof. Cheung enthused.

Addressing gender and ethnic diversity in the field

Another aspect that Prof. Cheung is looking into is increasing awareness to address gender and ethnic diversity in the international realm.

"It is a great time for women in ophthalmology to come together and actively volunteer their services in various roles because there are now more and more opportunities at every level," she shared.

As a mentor, Prof. Cheung also considers herself a mentee, always learning new things as part of a peer group. "Learning doesn't have to be unidirectional. I always continue to learn from my colleagues and I would encourage an open discussion to share our knowledge and findings with one another," she added.

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As a renowned figure in the international ophthalmology community, Prof. Cheung has not only established an extensive network of international collaborators but has also taken on international leadership roles in the field of AMD and its Asian variant, polypoidal choroidal vasculopathy (PCV).

She is also a council member of the APVRS and has been selected as the Congress president of the 17th APVRS Congress to be held in Singapore in late 2024.

"It is, indeed, a great honor for me and my team to organize the Congress and to welcome all the delegates to Singapore," she enthused. "Currently, we're working very hard within the local organizing committee together with the Secretariat in Hong Kong."

"It is also an opportunity to work with a team that encompasses the College of Ophthalmology in Singapore, the Singapore Society of Ophthalmology, and the representatives from the public hospitals and private sector," she continued.

Prof. Cheung and her team will be organizing an exciting and informative scientific program while ensuring that delegates and speakers have a pleasant stay in Singapore.

"We will prepare engaging sightseeing and social programs. With the audit program, we look forward to hosting a Young Ophthalmologists' symposium as well as some sessions for Women in Retina," she shared, emphasizing that the organizing committee will feature

substantial representation from women.

She also mentioned that a growing trend within the APVRS Congress is to strategically collaborate with other societies worldwide, such as the Canadian

Visual Rational Society, the Royal College of Ophthalmologists in the UK, as well as various other institutions or societies that are going to co-sponsor the symposiums.



This aims to increase diversity, whether it's gender or international representation.

A passion for eye care

Looking back, Prof. Cheung knew she wanted to be in the medical field. Her first choice was either a career in surgery or a role within the medical department.

"Ophthalmology offers a nice balance between medical and surgical aspects. Within this field, there are numerous avenues to explore, so I further sub-specialized in retina. I am also passionate about age-related macular degeneration," she shared.

"Within ophthalmology itself, there are also a lot of different opportunities, each emphasizing different aspects. For example, some focus on imaging, while others are on more technical surgical aspects," she continued.

Prof. Cheung is drawn to the imaging aspects because she can correlate them with treatment outcomes. Another aspect of ophthalmology that excites her is the abundance of clinical trials. The treatments administered to patients are supported by a wealth of clinical trial data. "This is another aspect that keeps us going, keeps us always looking out for the next frontier," she said.

The timing of scientific development is also a push factor for her. "For example, when I started fellowship training, it was when anti-VEGF therapy started to come into clinical practice and there were a lot of opportunities to witness how new drugs have developed. We witnessed the testing of these drugs. Some of them came through to the clinic, and some of them fell through and did not succeed in the clinical trial. All in all, it has been a really exciting journey," Dr. Cheung shared.

A balancing act

When asked about the challenges that women ophthalmologists face, Prof. Cheung believes they fall into two areas.

"The first is deciding on your career goal and calling. The decision should be based on identifying your

passions and talents, as well as understanding your strengths and your weaknesses," she noted.

She encourages her trainees and mentees to aim high and not settle for less. Once they have set their goals, the second challenge is all about time management.

"You can get tips from colleagues, friends, or family on how to balance your time and commitments between home and work. Effective time management and hard work are essential skills for both men and women," she added.

However, Dr. Cheung believes that, on the whole, women do take up more roles in terms of caring for the family and looking after their kids. Although, increasingly, there is a positive trend with new-age men actively taking part in household responsibilities.

Prof. Cheung is fortunate to have a husband who actively shares parenting responsibilities. He is also an ophthalmologist, and they underwent training around the same time. Their two sons are currently in university.

When it comes to juggling work and family life, her advice to women is to prioritize what is important. Recognizing that we only have 24 hours in a day, we must focus on what is more urgent, she said.

"Don't bite off more than you can chew. But whatever that you commit to doing, deliver them well," she advised.

When asked about the most satisfying aspect of her career, Prof. Cheung always relishes the research work that she continually pursues.

"What we practice now is different from what we learned in medical school. The field of science and medicine is evolving all the time. What keeps me very excited is to hopefully stay at the cutting edge of where the evolution of the understanding is—be it about how diseases occur (pathogenesis), how we treat patients, or whether we're developing new therapies to bring back to our patients," Prof. Cheung concluded. 🌟



Contributing Doctor

Prof. Dr. Gemmy Cheung is currently the Arthur Lim Professor in Ophthalmology at the Duke-NUS Medical School, National University of Singapore. She is head of the Medical Retina Department at, Singapore National Eye Center, and head of the Retina Research Group at the Singapore Eye Research Institute (SERI). Her research interests focus on Asian retinal diseases, specifically age-related macular degeneration (AMD), polypoidal choroidal vasculopathy (PCV), and myopic macular degeneration. She has published more than 300 peer-reviewed articles, including high-impact work advancing the understanding of AMD, especially in the context of an Asian population, and secured research funding of more than SGD \$40 million. Internationally, Prof. Cheung has assumed leadership roles in the field of AMD and PCV. She has delivered more than 200 invited lectures and has trained numerous fellows and Ph.D. students. Prof. Cheung has represented the Asian-Pacific perspectives at high-level international ophthalmology meetings, including the annual American Academy of Ophthalmology subspecialty day, the EURETINA Congress, and the Asia-Pacific Vitreo-retina Society Annual Congress. She is a council member of the Asia-Pacific vitreo-retina society, regional advisor to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, Exco member of the International Retinal Imaging Society and the Asia-Pacific Ocular Imaging Society, and credentialing committee member (past) of the prestigious Macula Society. She serves on the editorial boards of the American Journal of Ophthalmology, Asia-Pacific Journal of Ophthalmology, Retina, Eye, and PLoS One. She has received several prestigious awards from the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology, the Asia-Pacific Vitreo-retinal Society, and the Macula Society.



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