

Advocate of Women's Health

by Sharon Chua
Photos by Elmer Gono

An interview with Dr Dharshini Gopalakrishnakone

Trained in obstetrics and gynaecology, Dr Dharshini Gopalakrishnakone, an active advocate of women's health wears many hats in her current clinical practice. After acquiring her bachelor's (Medicine and Surgery) and master's degrees (Obstetrics and Gynaecology) from the Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore (NUS), Dr Gopalakrishnakone subsequently trained at the National University Hospital (NUH) and KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH). In order to equip herself with valuable skills for the obstetrics aspect of her practice, she later joined the Department of Neonatology at NUH and trained in neonatological resuscitation.

A passionate educator, she later became a Clinical Teacher and Examiner at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at NUS and has conducted numerous clinical skills workshops to train medical students and young doctors in obstetrics management, including applications of various contraceptive devices. She stayed on with the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at NUS for 10 years and was appointed Chief Registrar in 2011. Currently, Dr Gopalakrishnakone is in private practice at the Sincere Medical Specialist Center for Women.

Bitten by the "medicine bug" in childhood

But Dr Gopalakrishnakone's passion in promoting women's health originated from her childhood. Her father, Emeritus Professor P. Gopalakrishnakone was a huge driving force behind her pursuit of the field of medicine.

"As a 4-year-old child, I used to scamper around the halls of the Faculty of Medicine at NUS and peek into labs and museums stocked with anatomy dissection specimens and be filled with wonder," she enthusiastically shared. "Dad does a lot of research in toxicology to analyse the efficacy of using venom from the most dangerous of creatures to cure various diseases," she added.

Her childhood "toys", which consisted of preserved intact venomous snakes and scorpions, along with dissection blocks encasing specimens of hearts and brains; instead of watching TV, she would use her father's microscope to analyse everything from flowers to nails under very high magnification.

"It was amazing and I knew that medicine, research and lecturing was something I could see myself thoroughly enjoying," she recalled.

Today, Dr Gopalakrishnakone is experienced in antenatal ultrasound

as well as performing natural childbirth, assisted delivery (vacuum and forceps) and Caesarean sections. She has extensively trained in gynaecological surgery (hysterectomies, myomectomies, cystectomies), laparoscopic (key-hole) procedures and has a keen interest in hysteroscopic surgeries (a non-invasive procedure to surgically treat small masses within the womb).

Actively promoting women's health

A pro-life advocate, Dr Gopalakrishnakone firmly believes that a woman's gynaecologist should be her trusted health advocate for life as she goes through the amazing phases of puberty, pregnancy and menopause. She strongly believes in regular women's health screening and preventive care involving early resolution of fertility issues, HPV vaccines and routine pap smears to prevent cervical cancer, as well as osteoporosis prevention and maintenance of cardiovascular health in menopausal patients.

"Obstetrics is such a happy specialty to be in as you see patients blossom from young women to confident mothers right before your very eyes," said Dr


Gopalakrishnakone. As a mother of three kids, she finds immense joy in not just being able to impart her clinical knowledge but also her maternal experiences to her patients. "It's very satisfying to be able to actually empathize with many of the issues pregnant women and new moms go through and to advise them from both a doctor's point of view and from an experienced mom's point of view as well," she shared.

Furthermore, Dr Gopalakrishnakone is a firm breastfeeding advocate, an advocacy which originated from her earlier days of learning from the excellent midwives and lactation consultants at NUH. "Having gone through a singleton pregnancy expecting one really large kid and having gone through a twin pregnancy expecting two feisty kiddos who really made me work for it; I am able to combine medical and surgical skills with on the ground experience to ensure that my patients get the perfect care and information tailored to their unique pregnancy and experiences," she explained.

The challenging journey

Like most doctors we've interviewed here at Medical Grapevine, Dr Gopalakrishnakone had her fair share of obstacles and challenges in the beginning of her career. "Medical education is never about the textbooks," she firmly stated. "It's a long drawn out apprenticeship that heavily depends on excellent teachers and mentors along the way."

But like those who came before her, she was blessed to have met dedicated surgical teachers at NUH when she started in 2001. "My brilliant mentor and head of department then, Professor PC Wong, is someone that I still look up to for advice up to this day; the superb surgical skills



It's very satisfying to be able to actually empathize with many of the issues pregnant women and new moms go through and to advise them from both a doctor's point of view and from an experienced mom's point of view as well.



I'm very glad to have settled brilliantly and I truly enjoy the independence and the ability to manage patients from start to finish with the degree and type of care that I would want for them.

and life lessons I've picked up from renowned doctors such as Professor Arjit Biswas and Professor Ilancheran, will never be forgotten," she shared. "Without them, the uncharted road ahead for a trainee gynaecology surgeon would have been next to impossible."

Also, Dr Gopalakrishnakone credits the close friendships she developed with her senior trainees who selflessly guided her through the seven years it took to become a specialist. "One of them is my dear friend, Dr Citra Mattar, who took time off to train me and pushed me through the hoops, while even covering my duties when needed," she added. "The midwives at NUH

are people that I literally grew up with: from my eager medical student days anticipating the first delivery, through the arduous residency and traineeship years to the final exit and entry to becoming a fully-fledged specialist, their teaching and secret techniques to ensuring a successful delivery were above par," she explained.

Despite the bumps on the roads, with difficult and complicated obstetrics cases along the way, these teachers, emphasised Dr Gopalakrishnakone, were the guardians who helped her get to where she is today.

Milestones and achievements

Though initially daunting, moving to private practice from the government hospital in 2012 is one decision that Dr Gopalakrishnakone is most proud of. "I'm very glad to have settled brilliantly and I truly enjoy the independence and the ability to manage patients from start to finish with the degree and type of care that I would want for them," she explained.

Currently, her patient load mainly consists of expatriate ladies from all over the world, as well as brilliant Singaporean high flyers. "As each of them has a unique and amazing life story to tell, I love talking to them beyond the confines of the clinical scenario," she said. "My nurses know very well how my clinic sessions can over run because of my chattiness but

I do feel that it is absolutely crucial to know a patient's background and personality to see how best I can help her as a doctor." As her brand of clinical practice, Dr Gopalakrishnakone aims to be holistic in every aspect of her approach, to ensure the comfort and satisfaction of the patient and her family. As a mother to three beautiful daughters, Dr Gopalakrishnakone is able to use all her pregnancy and postnatal breastfeeding experiences to help patients through their own pregnancies.

In some cases however, when women face the choice between their own mortality and losing the ability to reproduce, Dr Gopalakrishnakone has to look for a compromise somewhere in between, despite the premise in obstetrics, which has always been that the health of the mother comes first: "It is easy to say that life-saving surgery takes precedence over fertility but one should never judge another until we've walked in their shoes," she explained.

Life-work balance

Doctors might have a crazy work schedule, but just like normal people they have families to take of as well. The dilemma has always been looking for that right balance between personal life and work. Indeed, Dr Gopalakrishnakone is not an exemption: "Despite my busy workload, I stretch my time for my children and ensure that they get the maximum wondrous experiences out of what life has to offer. Seeing my babies grow up healthy and full of character and brilliance brings immeasurable happiness."

However, Dr Gopalakrishnakone admittedly shared that practicing medicine definitely takes her away from family at the oddest of hours. "There are moments in church where I am staring at my iPhone



Photo Courtesy of Kong Kong Tony Lim

knowing a patient is in labour and anticipating a call; there are times where I get called in the middle of a family outing and everyone speeds with me to the hospital in the car when I'm called for a delivery," she explained. Crucial to understanding this hectic work schedule is the full support of her family: "My kids actually love it strangely enough, especially when they get to buy treats from whichever hospital I bring them to while waiting for me. My husband is a lawyer and his timings can also run quite late, but it's never as unpredictable as mine!"

A strong believer of work-life balance, Dr Gopalakrishnakone noted that she is very fortunate to have a strong support from both sets of grandparents to help her care for the kids' needs while she's at work.

Beyond medicine

Family life and medical practice is not just what all doctors do; Dr Gopalakrishnakone have other interests as well: "I have loved travelling since I was a toddler and I'm blessed to have travelled to beautiful places like Greece, Egypt, Venice, Prague, Vienna and Munich. Now it looks like my kids enjoy travelling as much as I do, so that's something I absolutely enjoy planning and doing," she shared.

Today, having been in the field of obstetrics and gynaecology for 14 years, Dr Gopalakrishnakone cannot see herself in any other profession. "Someone once said that if you find something you love doing, you won't work a day in your life; it definitely feels that way with my OBGyn practice," she explained.

When we asked for some words of wisdom she'd like to convey to aspiring young doctors out there, she said: "Be sincere, passionate and honest in everything you do. If you truly feel and behave that way, it shines through for all to see, including your colleagues and especially your patients. As Dr Normal Vincent Peele once said, enthusiasm makes a difference; always take time to bond with your patients and listen to their life stories as many times as possible. That would help in tailoring your treatments and management protocols, thus benefiting them immensely." **MG**