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Professor Dr. Cheong Sok Ching – Under The Microscope (http://www.cancerresearch.my/professor-dr-cheong-sok-ching-under-the-microscope/)

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Our very own Immunotherapy Groundbreaker, Prof Dr Cheong Sok Ching is featured in this week Focus Malaysia's TOP CLASS (Careers Unusual) segment to inspire young talents to consider a career in the sciences. Thank you to writer Angie Tan for the article.

Professor Dr. Cheong Sok Ching is group leader of the oral cancer team at Cancer Research Malaysia, Malaysia and adjunct professor in the department of oral and maxillofacial surgery at the University of Malaya, Malaysia. She is a Malaysian scientist who has dedicated her career to the study of oral cancer. She has received numerous accolades for her work in this field and her team has been able to make significant contributions in the understanding of oral cancer.

How about you? Would you like to be part of this inspiring role? Check out our Career Page (click) (http://www.cancerresearch.my/join-us/) and maybe you can help and work with us to #reversecancer.

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Under the MICROSCOPE

Beyond working in the lab, there's more to a scientist than meets the eye

| Text by ANGIE TAN | angietan@hckmedia.com

Professor Dr Cheong Sok Ching says to be a research scientist, one needs to have the ability to connect the dots and be inherently curious

Prof Dr Cheong Sok Ching is a Malaysian scientist who has dedicated her career to the study of oral cancer. An adjunct professor at Universiti Malaya and associate member of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia, Dr Cheong is currently Group Leader at Cancer Research Malaysia.

She has received numerous accolades for her work in this field and her team has been able to make significant contributions in the understanding of oral cancer.

Cheong's journey into oral cancer research began when she returned home after doing her PhD in London in 2001.

The Cancer Research Initiatives Foundation (CARIF, now known as Cancer Research Malaysia), which was established by Prof Teo Soo-Hwang, had just been set up and she was recruited to join them.

"I was hired by Prof Teo to establish the oral cancer research programme and I have continued to build our capacity in this area for more than 14 years now," she says.

The 42-year-old doctor adds that oral cancer was an area that Cancer Research Malaysia wanted to pursue as Asians seemed to be most susceptible to it.

Cheong had studied biochemistry and molecular biology at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in Bangi. She tells *Top Class* that in her final year and onwards to her PhD, she chose to focus on cancer research.

"I did most of my research in UKM with Prof Sheila Nathan and was also fortunate to receive two international fellowships (Commonwealth and Unesco-MCBN) to spend 14 months (of my PhD research programme) in Prof Dorothy Bennett's laboratory in St Georges Hospital Medical School in London," she continues. (Prof Bennet is a noted international authority on cell biology and was Head of the Cell Biology and Genetics Research Centre from 2014 to 2016).

Here Cheong shares her career as a research scientist with *Top Class*.

Have you always been interested in this field and how did you get involved in oral cancer research?

I developed an interest in research in the third year of my undergraduate studies and this is to the credit of my lecturers in UKM who were forward thinking and doing exciting research themselves. We were in the era of genetic engineering and this field opened up so many possibilities. Using this technology, we can improve yield in crops, understand how infectious agents cause disease, why cells become cancerous... as a result, this enabled us to think of better ways to increase productivity and more importantly find better ways of treating diseases.

What is a typical day at work like for you?

A typical day can vary from being in the office and lab discussing projects with other scientists, and writing up research findings or grant applications. It could also mean having a string of meetings with our collaborators on joint projects or with post-graduate students, discussing their latest findings or their thesis. In addition, some of my time is also invested in working with stakeholders to discuss and address science issues of national importance. I feel that all scientists should take responsibility in improving the ecosystem that we work in and I try to do my part through my affiliation with the Young Scientist Network of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia.

What drives you daily?

New knowledge and the opportunity to test our hypothesis are the main factors that motivate me. Being a cancer researcher I know and understand some of the challenges that we face with treating cancer patients and this gives me a sense of urgency to do what we can right now.

What do you find most rewarding about your job?

One of the perks of this job is that I get to work with highly motivated and like-minded individuals. These individuals are constantly challenging themselves and most importantly, work as a team to help one another other achieve their potential.

Is this profession in high demand?

Scientists are always in high in demand both locally and internationally. However, much of it is dependent on funding cycles. As is the case for all professions, certain skill sets are in demand more than others, and currently those involved in bioinformatics and analysis of big data are among those in high demand.

From an academic's viewpoint, what should a student be aware of if he is interested in pursuing a career in research?

When we are looking to hire a scientist, we look for individuals who are inherently curious, driven by information and have the ability to connect the dots. Tenacity and the ability to work in a team are also important. To take the first step into a career in science, you need a degree in the sciences. Following that, training through MSc and PhD programmes is necessary if you intend to continue to build your career in this direction.

Are there any common misconceptions about being a scientist?

The biggest misconception is that lab work is the only thing scientists do. On the contrary, working in the lab makes up only a fraction of what we do. The reality is that scientists spend a lot of time studying the subject area, planning experiments, and analysing and interpreting the data. Much of this is done outside the lab. A very important aspect of a scientist's job is also to communicate research findings. This is typically done through presentations and scientific writing, which is often not featured as part of a scientist's job.

What are some of the challenges present?

We need more talent in science so that we can do more as a nation. Once we have a critical mass of talented researchers, I think we will be able to harness the creativity and technical ability of these individuals that will enable us to be more competitive in putting Malaysia on the map for technological advancements and innovations.

Can you share your proudest moment?

I have many of these moments because I think it is important to take stock of the progress you have made to stay motivated and to keep your sanity. Most of these are on discoveries that we have made or research reagents that we have generated, which have benefited the local and international community. For example, we have established many oral cancer cell lines — these are cancer cells from patients that we grow in the laboratory. We are among the few labs in the world to have successfully established these cell lines. This is pivotal in helping us understand how cancer develops and serve as a means for us to test cancer drugs before they can be further developed for the treatment of cancer. We have been fortunate to be recognised for our research efforts and for that I am grateful. I hope that we will continue to get the support from the public and private agencies.

Can you share any career advice with young scientists out there?

The first thing is to have an interest and passion in this area. The second is to have a trial run — intern in a research laboratory to see if this is really what you would like to do and if it is, give it everything you have to get a head start in this career that you have chosen.

(http://www.cancerresearch.my/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/20160827_N60_FCM_TPC_14_FC_UNDER-THE-MICROSCOPE.jpg)

Under The Microscope

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B.Sc(Hons)(1998)(UKM), UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA (UKM)

RECENT SELECTED PUBLICATIONS
(Publication).

Article in Academic Journals

2015

Vaithilingam RD, Safii SH, Baharuddin NA, Karen-Ng LP, Saub R, Ariffin F, Ramli H, Sharifuddin A, Hidayat MFH, Raman R, Chan YK, Rani NA, Rahim RA, Shahruddin N, Cheong SC, Bartold PM, Zain RB. Establishing and managing a periodontal biobank for research: the sharing of experience. Oral Dis. 2015 Jan;21(1):e62-9. doi: 10.1111/odi.12267. (*ISI-Indexed*)

2014

Vaithilingam RD, Safii SH, Baharuddin NA, Ng CC, Cheong SC, Bartold PM, Schaefer AS, Loos BG. Moving into a new era of periodontal genetic studies:relevance of large case-control samples using severe phenotypes for genome-wide association studies. J Perio Res 2014 Feb 17. 49(6):683-695. doi: 10.1111/jre.12167. (*ISI-Indexed*)

AREAS OF RESEARCH
(Project title), (Role), (From)-(Until), (Level), (Source).

Potential Therapeutic Targets From Driver Genes For Tongue And Cheek Cancers, Consultant, 2015 - 2018, *Geran Penyelidikan Universiti Malaya (UMRG Programme) - HTM (Wellness)*, (University)

Oral Cancer Research: Diagnostic And Biobanking Services, Consultant, 2013 - 2015, *Geran Penyelidikan Universiti Malaya (UMRG Programme) - HTM (Wellness)*, (University)

Next Generation Sequencing And Candidate Gene Screening Of Oral Squamous Cell Carcinoma, Consultant, 2013 - 2015, *Geran Penyelidikan Universiti Malaya (UMRG Programme) - HTM (Wellness)*, (University)

Identification of Early Genetic Changes to Predict the Behaviour of Oral Potentially Malignant Disorders and Oral Squamous Cell Carcinoma, Consultant, 2012 - 2014, *Geran Penyelidikan Universiti Malaya (UMRG) - HTM (Wellness)*, (University)

Identification of Cancer Specific Genomic Duplications and Deletions by Use of Array Based Comparative Genomic Hybridization (aCGH), Validation of Differentially Expressed Genes and Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNPs) Studies and Protein Array Analysis: Possible Prognostic Tools., Co-Investigator, 2011 - 2016, *High Impact Research (HIR)*, (University)

Periodontal Disease: The development of genetic biomarkers and the impact of disease on quality of life, Co-Investigator, 2011 - 2016, *High Impact Research (HIR)*, (University)