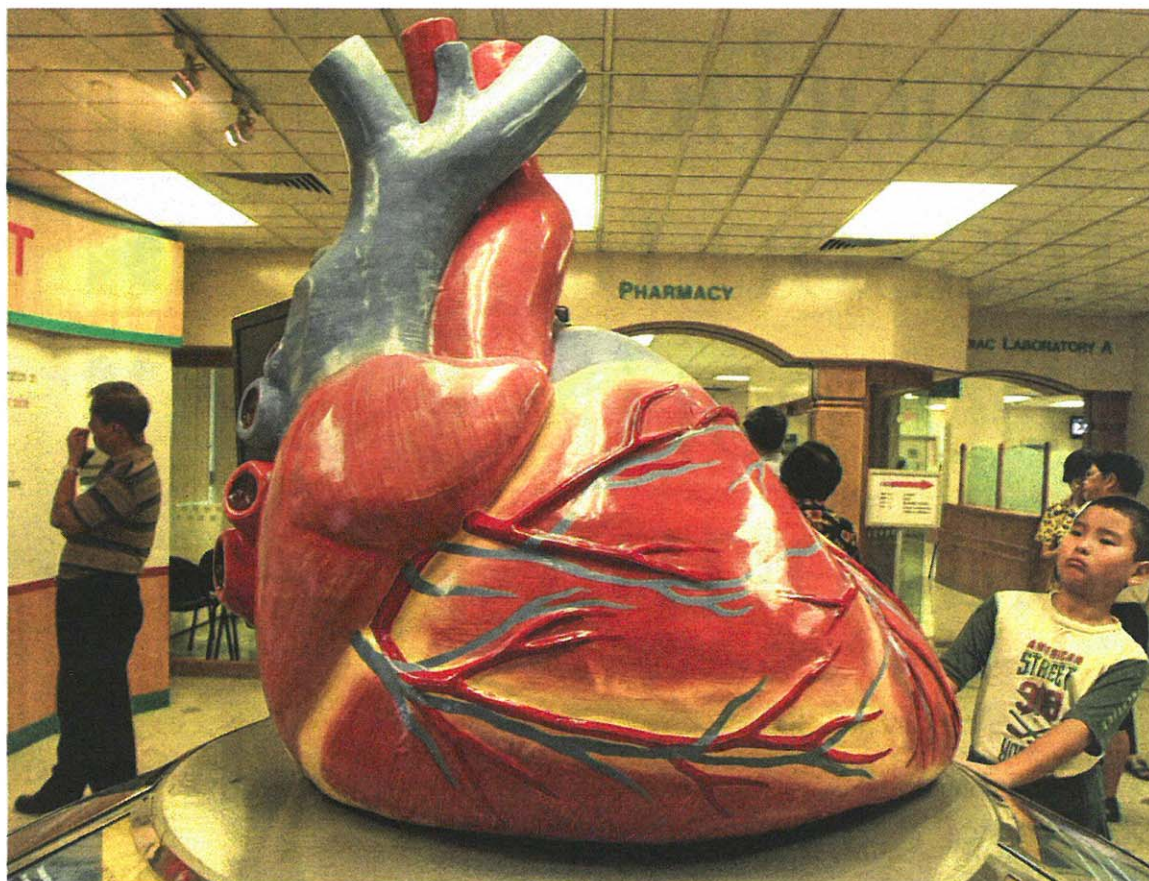


JUDITH TAN
juditht@sph.com.sg



PHOTOS: SPH FILE, RAFFLES HOSPITAL

Heart to heart



Dr Alvin Ng is an interventional and nuclear cardiologist with Raffles Hospital. He is also an adjunct assistant professor at Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore

Explain how you are a different kind of heart doctor to a layman.

I have always used the analogy of a car. The human body is like a car and its engine is the heart. You may service your car with any mechanic, but when an intricate problem surfaces, you will want to look for a specialist.

I studied nuclear cardiology, which is related to the scanning of the heart for blockages and understanding the details of blood flow of the heart using nuclear methods.

I also acquired the skills to open blockages using tubes inserted through the arteries and veins, much like a plumber.

Why do people choose to see you?

After 25 years of practice, seven in private practice, I realise patients usually look for doctors recommended by family and friends.

What puts someone at risk of heart disease?

Diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, cigarette use and family history. They contribute 60 to 70 per cent of possible risk exposure for heart disease.

How do you tell if a patient is at risk of heart disease?

Based on international guidelines, both high blood pressure and high cholesterol are clearly defined as contributing to heart disease.

Blood pressure can be confirmed instantaneously in the clinic or monitored at home.

Blood cholesterol levels can be assessed by a simple blood test.

So does it mean that once I take medicine to help my blood pressure and cholesterol, I take it for ever? Can I stop at any point?

These are the two most common chronic conditions and medication only works to suppress them. There is no cure. Lifestyle modification complements the care. This applies to both Western and Eastern approaches.

What medicines work against heart disease?

The polypill, a single pill with the ingredients to counteract cholesterol and high blood pressure, has been around for more than a decade.

Caduet is one such pill. It recognises the common occurrence of high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Separately, Norvasc and Lipitor are popularly prescribed medicines. Norvasc belongs to an effective class of anti-hypertension medication known as calcium channel blockers and Lipitor is a popular statin (that helps lower cholesterol levels).

We think heart disease is only for old people, is this true?

I have seen patients in their 30s suffering from heart attacks.

Does blood spurt on you during procedures?

I am rather tall, so even if blood spurts, it usually hits my assistants. Oops.

What is something you do so often, it's like second nature now?

It gratifies me all the time to save a person suffering from a heart attack by "clearing" the blockage. It makes my time training at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, US, away from my family, worthwhile.

How long did you train to do this?

I started at a local government hospital. I went through very comprehensive training at Johns Hopkins, learning not only the technical aspects, but also the ethics of being a good doctor – always putting patients first.

When should I come see you?

Knowing your risk profile is always useful. For example, men tend to have it worse than women and knowing your family history is always handy. Going for routine check-ups is always reassuring. For high blood pressure and high cholesterol, it is an objective surveillance.

What are the perks of your job?

Patients become friends. They entrust their health and secrets to me. Having that confidence is my greatest perk.