

ThePro

A pilot in the operating theatre

Anaesthesiologists safeguard the bodily functions of patients during surgery

Annabeth Leow

Q I specialise in anaesthesiology because...

A Anaesthesiology chose me. When I was in national service, my first medical officer posting was six months' clinical training in the anaesthesia department at Singapore General Hospital.

After that, the Health Ministry posted me to the now-defunct Toa Payoh Hospital for two years. The head of department applied for a training fellowship in anaesthesia for me, without informing me.

Q If I were to give an analogy for what I do, I'd be...

A A pilot. People say surgery is like being in a plane. We are the ones who make sure your bodily functions are kept as normal as possible.

Q Any interesting cases?

A In 1994, I was given the responsibility of looking after VIPs.

After anaesthetising a VIP patient, I asked him: "How are you?"

He misheard and thought I had said, "how old are you?"

He gave me his age at the time, 70-something, then looked at me and said: "Why do you ask?"

I quickly answered: "Oh, because your blood pressure is very good."

He asked me: "How old are you?" I said: "I'm 37. I'm head of this department, but I'm not very happy."

I had been unwilling to take up the stressful leadership position as I felt that I lacked management experience.

The VIP patient looked me square in the eyes and said: "What's the problem? I became prime minister



A conversation with a patient made Dr Chan Yew Weng realise that he himself was, at 37 then, not too young nor inexperienced to head his department.
ST PHOTO: DAVE LIM

Biobox

DR CHAN YEW WENG

Age: 60

Occupation: Senior consultant in the department of anaesthesiology, Singapore General Hospital; clinical associate professor at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine; and adjunct associate professor at the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School.

Dr Chan took home the Best Business Event Champion prize at the Singapore Tourism Awards this year. The event was held by the Singapore Tourism Board.

He won it for helping to secure Singapore's place as host of the World Congress of Anaesthesiologists in 2024, after several failed bids.

Dr Chan has dreamt of Singapore hosting the event – which he calls the Olympics of anaesthesiology – since attending the 1996 congress in Sydney. He said: "I wanted to do something impactful for anaesthesiology in Singapore."

This prompted him to take on leadership roles in the Singapore Society of Anaesthesiologists, as well as regional and world bodies.

Dr Chan is married with three daughters. One is a clinical psychologist and the other two are doctors.

of the country at the age of 35."

Q A typical day for me would be...

A Quite routine and less stressful since I relinquished all my hospital management duties a decade ago.

I usually start the day at 7.15am with a clinical teaching session. By 8.15am, I would be reviewing the clinical notes of patients scheduled for surgery that day and preparing the first patient for anaesthesia.

I finish work around 6pm and I may review some of the patients in

the wards or recovery rooms.

Q One little-known fact about anaesthesiology is...

A Without the progress and safety in anaesthesia care, many of the advanced surgical procedures involving robotic and minimally-invasive techniques cannot be done.

Q Patients who get my goat are...

A Those who do not adhere to fasting regimes or medication instructions on the morning of the surgery.

People need to know that these are safety measures to minimise the risk of possible complications.

Q Things that put a smile on my face are...

A Patients who wake up pain-free in the operating theatre, thank the staff and wave goodbye.

Q It breaks my heart when...

A We have to break the bad news to patients or their family members when the surgical diagnoses or out-

comes are not desirable.

Q My best tip is...

A We are never too young to take on leadership roles.

Q I wouldn't trade places for the world because...

A I have a fulfilling professional life. In fact, I am organising the upcoming World Congress of Anaesthesiologists in Singapore.

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