

Challenging the frontiers

Dr Vanitha Ratnalingam is one of the very few ophthalmologists in Malaysia specialising in corneal transplant. She did the nation proud by winning the 2010 Troutman Prize for innovation in corneal science at the International Cornea Society meeting held in Chicago USA. She let us have a glimpse of her life.



Receiving the troutman prize from Richard Troutman
photo credit Dr Vanitha Ratnalingam

Do briefly share your background

I obtained my medical degree from Universiti Sains Malaysia before completing my masters in Ophthalmology at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Over there I developed an interest in research, learning about the different study designs and how to critically appraise a clinical paper. Following my postgraduate studies, I went on to complete a fellowship in cornea and external eye disease at the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital in Melbourne, Australia. I'm also trained in the latest techniques of corneal transplant surgery, limbal stem cell transplant, collagen cross linking and managing diseases of the surface of the eye.

What is your most distinguished achievement in your area of research?

My interest in research combined with clinical knowledge has paved the way for my involvement in numerous clinical trials and publications in high impact clinical journals. Receiving the Troutman prize was an honour and a great encouragement that spurred me on to continue to push boundaries in my field of expertise. I try to keep abreast with innovations that might benefit my patients.

How has the progress of technology allowed you to embrace it for the benefit of your patients?

As a sub specialist in external eye diseases, I see a lot of patients with dry eyes. Rather than treating the symptoms with eye drops, I use the latest technology of tear film interferometry and meibography to ascertain the cause and type of dry eyes. I'm also the first ophthalmologist in Malaysia to utilize ThermoMechanical Ablation (Tixel) to treat dry eyes.

What is your philosophy of life?

I always advocate Aristotle's mantra that Pleasure in the job puts perfection in work.

Please describe your most poignant moments as an ophthalmologist

I have had many memorable moments as an ophthalmologist but the one that comes to mind is one that encouraged me to pursue ophthalmology. A patient who had been blind in both eyes had just had surgery and he was lying in bed on his back with his hand stretched out in front of him. For a long while he just kept staring at his hand. I went over and asked him if there was something wrong and he replied with amazement in his voice and tears in his eye, "I can see my hands!" Since then I have treated many patients with significant cataracts and corneal disease and have been privileged to see lives transformed.

Do you enjoy teaching?

Yes definitely. I have had the privilege to conduct instructional courses at various national and international meetings including the World Ophthalmology Congress and the European Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery. I'm also an honorary lecturer with Taylors College Medical School where I take every opportunity to encourage young minds. My dream is to see more Malaysians step up to do impactful and meaningful research as this will strengthen our standing on an international level.

If you can change the world, what will be your utmost priority?

My priority would be public education. Every child deserves free quality education. This includes children living in rural areas as well as those of migrants and refugees. Education is a basic human right that empowers young minds with the knowledge and skills to live productive and independent lives. It also protects the vulnerable from being exploited and strengthens community resilience.



photo credit Dr Vanitha Ratnalingam