

# Heart of the Matter

An Interview with Dr Eric Hong Cho Tek

Ruth Schaffer

*"Desire is the key to motivation, but it's determination and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal – a commitment to excellence – that will enable you to attain the success you seek."*  
— Mario Andretti

**Genes or environment?** What propelled Dr Eric Hong Cho Tek to become a doctor was likely a powerful combo of both.

"I grew up watching my father work as a family physician and I used to accompany him when he visited patients in the hospital. All I could do then as a child was to bring a bouquet of flowers to place by the side table. I saw the pain, despair and grief that the sick felt."

Sparked by the compulsion to do more for the sick and the needy, Dr Hong heeded the call to become a medicine man. He trained in Europe and America before returning to Singapore to eventually become one of the country's most respected interventional cardiologists. It was not an easy journey, but the experience tremendously helped shape the kind of doctor he has become.

"Away from the affluent city centre, the ethos of Irish medical schools places high importance on good communicative skills and the ability to relate to patients coming from the different strata of society. Knowledge can always be acquired; what influenced me the most was the realisation that there is an art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy and understanding may outweigh

a surgeon's knife or a doctor's dispensed drugs."

## To the Other Side of the World and Back

After a short working stint in Ireland, Dr Hong received basic specialist training in internal medicine at SGH and advanced specialist training in cardiology at NUH. Following these, he went on to the Brigham & Women's Hospital/ Harvard Medical School in the USA to complete fellowships in not just one, but two sub-specialties. Awarded with a fellowship opportunity through the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), Dr Hong received mentorship from doyens in cardiology, Professor Marcelo Di Carli, an eminent nuclear cardiologist and world authority on CT/ PET imaging and advanced multimodality cardiac imaging, and Dr Jeffrey Popma, a world renowned interventional cardiologist and previous president of the Society for Cardiac Angiography and Interventions (SCAI) and current chairman of the American College of Cardiology Cardiac Catheterization Committee and Ad Hoc Committee on Simulation Training.

"The Harvard Fellowship program provided wonderful and amazing opportunities. My mentors

in multi-modality cardiac imaging and interventional cardiology were world renowned experts who worked extremely hard: they saw a lot of patients, taught a lot, wrote a lot of papers. They were constantly pushing themselves to the forefront of their fields. I learned not only how to use state-of-the-art cardiac imaging to complement the latest interventional cardiology techniques, but to be the nidus for paradigm shift and to bring out the best of the latest technologies to individualise treatment."

It was undoubtedly a competitive and demanding programme, and to top it all, the challenges Dr Hong was facing on the work front was matched by an equally frenzied home front.

"My wife, an ophthalmologist, had just finished her fellowship in the US. She and my kids have just relocated back to Singapore from the USA. After six months, it was my turn to leave for USA. That period was a crazy roller coaster ride for us; in a couple of years, we had to set up house in four different cities in two continents!"

Was the sacrifice and turmoil worth it? "I had to spend precious time away from the family including my aging grandparents and parents, and

*There will never be a time when one can profess to know it all or cure it all – ever. It's both the blessing and the curse of our profession: the learning never ends!*

