

# DOCTOR BUG

While power couples may be more uncommon in the traditional corporate arena – where both husband and wife hold top corporate positions in large organisations, the reverse appears to be true in the medical arena. Jessica See talks to one such power couple in medicine to find out what makes a doctor-doctor marriage work.





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rust,” says ophthalmologist Dr Leo Seo Wei, who is an adult and paediatric eye specialist with her own private practice at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre. “The most important thing is: you have to trust each other. You have to understand that marriage is not made in heaven; you have to put effort in to make it work.”

She adds, “As doctors – with the kind of effort we put into our work, if we put a similar kind of effort into our marriage, it will last.” Dr Leo is married to cardiologist Dr Eric Hong, who also has his own private practice in the same hospital.

In fact, one key reason why many doctors end up marrying other doctors is simply because husband and wife would understand the long hours and stresses of medical practice. Dr Hong explains, “I think it’s easier when your spouse understands how important your work is. In any marriage, there is incompatibility when one spouse thinks their career is more important than the other’s.”

Dr Leo agrees, “It’s a lot easier when your partner understands the stress that a doctor goes through,

and is going through the same thing as well. It helps to have a spouse who understands. Even though we have different specialties, there are also a lot of similarities in what we do. After all, the ultimate goal is to care for the patients and help them recover, so there’s a lot of synergy as well in what we do.”

A big plus is that a doctor spouse is also a respected colleague that speaks the same language and whom you can consult on certain cases. “We talk to each other about difficult cases. Since we are both doctors, we can just talk to each other, and the other person just listens, which is okay,” says Dr Leo, with a smile, “Doctors are good listeners; no special effort.”

When it comes to children, while Dr Leo may take on the more traditional role of nurturing their kids, she confesses that she is also more of a “big picture” person: “As long as things get done, as long as they have completed the homework, I am okay.” Having her own practice helps – she can leave early if there’s anything on in school or if she needs to help them with their work. Their daughter is in Secondary One while the son is in Primary Five.

One thing Dr Leo makes a point to do: “I volunteer at school and I think that’s important. When children see you serve, they are happy and want to give back to community too. I try to give back to community projects

and try to involve them too.”

Time is an especially challenging issue for Dr Hong, being an intervention cardiologist, as he can be called in for an emergency at any time. “It’s the unpredictability,” explains Dr Leo. “Especially for my husband, you just can’t foresee emergencies. You can’t expect him to be at every children’s party or school event. We have to make do to be flexible.”

There are undoubtedly a lot of sacrifices that have to be made, something that Dr Hong is well aware of even when he chose to specialize in this area. Many things that conventional families may take for granted are not something the Hong family can indulge in. Says Dr Hong, “We hardly go for movies, for example. We are just not a typical family, we don’t have time for movies. Even though I may not be on call, but when other doctors call me, or when friends call me, someone could be having an acute heart attack, and I may have to drop everything and go because it could make a difference in someone’s life. That being said – although a very noble gesture – it sometimes intrudes into our own routine of daily life.

“There have been times when I couldn’t turn up for my family members. Even my grandmother, who doted on me, never really understood what I did. She couldn’t understand



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how I could be so busy. When she got admitted into the hospital – in a different hospital, and because I was so busy, I didn't even have time to visit her. Even though she can boast that her favourite grandson is a doctor, I couldn't get to see her until midnight!

"My wife as well - she sees kids, especially on weekends when children get into a lot of trouble at the playground, and get hurt. It may be our weekend time off, but an emergency is an emergency.

It is very hard to have family holidays, says Dr Hong. "Even on a plane or a cruise, you can't get away, once they know we are doctors. Once we went on a cruise, and we were telling ourselves, 'Great, no one knows who we are' and the next moment, they announced that they have a cardiologist on board! And you can't just turn it down, you can't pretend not to be what you are."

Not just for immediate and extended family, they have made sacrifices in terms of their social life as well. "That's why even for family friends - in the years we have drifted apart as we are all so engrossed in our work. We are not the usual people that we can have poolside parties, and children's birthday parties," adds Dr Hong. "In fact, looking back, our children never had birthday parties! I think some people may say we are such

mean parents, but something will always crop up, you can't even get together for birthday cake cutting. So whatever time we have, I guess we value the time more."

One can sense the passion that both husband and wife put into their calling, and can only admire their dedication, and empathize with the personal sacrifices they had to make for their family and themselves.

Says Dr Hong, "My perspective is we do as much as we can, hopefully try to set an example for our children, trying our very best to help ourselves, family and society and I hope that it will rub off. My dad is a doctor. To me, I'm proud of him, I wish I can do better, and I hope my children will be proud of me and my wife, and the work we do. Being doctor's children, being a father myself, I think honestly work life balance has never been something which I could ever claim to be an authority on.

"I cannot pretend to be a very good father, neither can I pretend to be the best cardiologist. But to me I am very lucky that my wife is understanding and she is in the same profession. She understands the urgencies of some of my patients. She has never complained. I count my blessings in the sense who I am, what I am doing, and also because of her support."

Despite their busy schedules and lack of personal time, this

wonderful couple still make it a point to give back to society. Dr Hong shares on one of the things they are both working on together - a health mentorship programme, which is extended to less privileged kids from the neighborhood schools who are 14 and 15 years of age: "The whole idea is to give these kids an opportunity to be exposed to what we do as doctors. So during the June holidays, we actually undertake these students to come for a few days' exposure with us. The whole objective of the exercise is to inspire them – to tell them that as long as there is hard work, they can get somewhere.

Why this age group? "This is the time when they are still studying but sometimes at this age, they may lose sight of why they are studying. For some of us who come from educated backgrounds, we may understand the need to study, but for others who don't, sometimes they don't even know why they are going for exams, so they may fall by the wayside. So what we want to do is to inspire them, not necessarily to be a doctor, but even as a nurse or paramedic or a technician in ophthalmology or cardiology.

"It's a nice concept, and in order for them to be accepted, the principals and teachers select these special students who tag along with us for two to three days. The

introverted students can then go back and give a spiel on how the experience was, and most times, the feedback we get from the teachers is, their academic grades actually improve. Unfortunately, the downside is: it's always during summer holidays; that also means our children also don't go for holidays. This is the time we assign two weeks of the holidays, so our kids do complain, what about them?" he grins.

Do they think their kids will eventually pursue careers as doctors too?

"Medicine is a changing field," says Dr Leo, "we don't necessarily want them to be in medicine. We just want them to be happy."

Dr Hong agrees wholeheartedly: "I know what I want of my children, I don't want them to grow up to be spoilt brats. I want them to earn their keep, value what they have, and I want them be able to work hard, to be able to take some knocks, and to get up, and they don't just take life for granted.

"We want to be able to provide well for them but I think more important is character. We both want our children to be steadfast, not be arrogant, to be of giving nature. That's why we bring them to the nursing homes, not just for fun, but they need to know there are a lot of people out there who are less

privileged, so they don't just live a sheltered life where they think opportunities are just laid out for them."

Apart from trying their best to find time for their family, they also make it a point to find time for each other, and to make sure that love, intimacy and plain old companionship don't suffer because of the constant demands of family and medical practice. "We try to go for a holiday at least once a year – just the two of us," says Dr Leo, "I think that's important - couple time. It's better now that we work in the same hospital. We sometimes get to meet each other for lunch."

Dr Hong concurs. "We try to make the most of whatever little time we have with each other – dinner time, even driving home together, I think it's a blessing. Some people may not think so, but I'm happy even in a traffic jam, 'cos it's time together!"

Type A personality traits, found in many professionals, are especially endemic among doctors as generally, they been trained to deal from strength with patients' weaknesses, without revealing their own, and to constantly make life and death decisions. So when two doctors tie the knot, there is a likelihood for conflict. This is no different with Dr Hong and Dr Leo.

Says Dr Hong, "We both know our own personalities. We are both very strong minded

and we are good at what we do, and to be where we are today, we have both worked very hard, so we both value our current positions, enough to respect each other's work.

"And I think that in any relationship, it's a lot of give and take. It's not a fairy tale or like in the Hollywood movies; the reality of life is that we all have our challenges. As doctors, we get highs and lows, we are after all, humans and sometimes we are good until when fatigue overwhelms us, then we are not as efficient and as logical as we should be.

"Sometimes, with sleep deprivation, certain things are uttered which shouldn't be uttered, that you cannot take back."

It helps when both parties understands this, and work around it. Dr Leo adds, "Doctors can be quite individualistic, as we are used to making our own decisions. We just have to remember common goals, and that we are a team."

Their advice for other medical couples? Dr Leo laughs, "We are still trying to stay afloat. Advice for other medical couples – try to multitask, make the best of what you have, have realistic expectations. If you have all the time, you can do everything to the most minute detail. If time is precious, you just have to prioritise." And whatever you do, count your blessings, says Dr Hong. ■





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Since we  
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Doctors  
are good  
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