

MIND
your
BODY

The Pro

The restoration specialist will meet you

Surgeon Anthony Tang tells **Joan Chew** why breast lumps need to be checked by a doctor

I specialise in breast cancer surgery because...

I have always been interested in all forms of surgery as there is the satisfaction of seeing your patients get well again almost immediately.

Breast cancer surgery can be an emotional roller-coaster ride, especially for women who view their breasts as a symbol of their femininity. It is obvious when these external organs are missing after the operation, and it can hit them badly.

Breast cancer surgery is fascinating because...

Just 50 years ago, breast cancer surgery was drastic and involved removing the chest muscle along with the breast, a practice which was believed to prevent cancer recurrence.

These days, there are more advanced surgical techniques which are used together with chemotherapy or radiotherapy, to leave the patient with no traces of detectable cancer and preserve as much of the breast as possible.

One of the options to preserve the breast is to put the patient through chemotherapy first to shrink the tumour, so only a lumpectomy (breast lump removal) is required.

One little known fact about breast lumps is...

Most lumps are not cancerous, yet all lumps must be checked by a doctor.

Only 10 to 15 per cent of them are cancerous.

If I were to give an analogy for what I do, I would be...

A restoration specialist.

During surgery, I remove the whole or part of the breast which contains cancer, while the plastic surgeon removes a flap of skin from the abdomen. We work together to reconstruct the breast to restore things to as close to its original appearance as possible.

I have come across all types of cases...

Most are related to breast cancer. Others may be skin lesions or lumps in the armpits, which may indicate that cancer has spread there from other parts of the body.



ST PHOTO: DANIEL NEO

BIO BOX Dr Anthony Tang

AGE: 43

OCCUPATION: Specialist in general surgery and consultant at Raffles Surgery Centre at Raffles Hospital

Dr Tang's first surgical experience left his team and himself in stitches. As a houseman at the age of 25, he held a scalpel to a patient's skin and tried to make an incision. However, he applied such tentative pressure that he merely made a scratch on it.

Thankfully, the senior doctors liked his keen attitude and looked beyond the boo-boo, so he had the chance to undergo surgical training, he said.

It is very sad when I diagnose cancer in a young person at the prime of her life.

Sometimes, I end up with a wry smile on my face when I see the occasional patient who, despite having full-blown cancer which has spread, keeps coming back each year for check-ups, when she was told that she had only six months to live.

It is a reminder that doctors can underestimate a patient's prognosis.

A typical day for me...

Starts at about 7am, always with a good cup of coffee.

At the hospital, I check on my patients in the wards before starting work at my outpatient clinic or going to the operating theatre.

Today, most of his patients are battling breast cancer and face the prospect of losing part or all of their breasts.

He admitted that in his early years as a doctor, he was "too proudly sure of himself" and would brush aside some of his patients' comments.

"With more wisdom now, I always take a step back to reassess the situation and listen more intently to what my patients say and even observe what they do not say."

As the fellowship head at Singapore Stanford Biodesign, Dr Tang helps to train the next generation of medical-technology innovators in Asia.

The bachelor is working with a four-man team to develop a medical device which can be used at home to alleviate pain and bleeding in haemorrhoids (piles).

On some days, when I end as early as 5pm, I can indulge in my favourite pastimes, such as playing tennis and watching plays and musicals.

Otherwise, I enjoy a good dinner with family or friends.

Much of my free time is spent on researching medical-device innovation.

I love patients who...

Take an interest in and understand the importance of their health.

Some patients will request to postpone their operation for about a month because of commitments.

Sometimes, we need to relook our list of priorities. Surely, health should

always be placed higher than our jobs.

Patients who get my goat are...

Those who opt for seemingly magical cures promised by bogus practitioners.

Recently, an Australian blogger who became famous after claiming she was conquering brain cancer through natural therapy admitted she had faked the disease.

Today, it is easy to find answers to medical issues online, but one should rely on reputable sites, such as those by hospitals that are leaders in the medical field, like the Mayo Clinic.

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

Sincere thanks and compliments.

I think all personnel in the medical field would love that and it certainly spurs us to do our jobs better.

One of the best compliments I have received was from my mother, who once said that if she could choose any doctor to treat her, she would pick me because I would patiently explain complex medical issues in layman's terms to her.

It could be because I am her son, but she is a brutally honest person.

It breaks my heart when...

Someone with a totally treatable breast cancer decides to go for an alternative treatment and comes back after about a year with an incurable disease.

I still try to help her to the best of my ability, such as through palliative treatment, but it saddens me.

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

I enjoy what I do. Working with a great bunch of people at the hospital, who are all trying hard to help patients get well, makes it easier to come to work every day.

My best tip is...

If you see or feel a new lump or bulge in any part of your body, suddenly notice blood in your stool or urine, or are losing weight when you usually have a good appetite, see a doctor.

Although people are often worried about their finances, I believe that one's health is more important.

It is almost always cheaper to treat any disease in the early stages than when it becomes full-blown.

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