

AGE: 53**OCCUPATION:** Senior consultant ophthalmologist at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital

Dr Goh was five when he discovered he had a knack for fixing things. Some model airplanes and robot figurines he assembled then are now proudly displayed in his terrace house in Jalan Peminpin, near Bishan.

Later, he realised he enjoyed microsurgery, which requires precise skills. He obtained specialist ophthalmology qualifications from Singapore and Britain in 1990.

The first years of treating patients who had lost their sight made him appreciate the close affinity between the brain and eyes. "If the part of the brain processing visual images is damaged, it affects vision," he said.

In 1994, he was selected by the Ministry of Health for a

year-long neuro-ophthalmology fellowship programme at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in the United States. That training enabled him to handle more complex visual conditions which are related to the nerves and brain.

In 2006, he was trained at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Australia to treat eye movement disorders, such as jiggly eyes, which is the involuntary movement of the eyes caused by a brain abnormality.

He is still "constantly challenged by rare eye disorders so baffling that the learning never ends".

He is married to a 48-year-old teacher. They have four children aged between 15 and 20.

Dr Goh will give a free talk on how conditions such as stroke, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy can be treated on Saturday from 2pm to 4pm at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, basement 1, conference room 2. To register, call 6684-4140.

ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

An eye for brain diseases

Neuro-ophthalmologist Goh Kong Yong tells **Joan Chew** how poor vision can be a symptom of a brain tumour

I sub-specialise in neuro-ophthalmology because...

In many instances, the root cause of poor vision is a disease affecting the brain, so I pick up these signs early and intervene before the disease spreads and the patient is beyond redemption. For example, blurred vision can be caused by simple diseases, such as cataracts, or more complex ones, such as strokes.

Once the diagnosis is confirmed through tests, my mission to protect the eyes begins almost immediately through surgery, laser or medication.

The brain is fascinating because...

It is the "motherboard" of the human body, so when a patient suffers from unexplained poor vision, I first go to the brain for answers.

One little known fact about neuro-ophthalmology is...

It may be the least glamorous of the eye sub-specialities, but the personal fulfilment I get from solving a mysterious eye ailment is unmatched. Many people associate eye surgeons with cosmetic or Lasik surgery but, in contrast, I treat patients who are generally unwell and face the threat of vision loss or permanent poor vision.

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

Crime scene investigator. I search for clues as to why a patient has poor vision. The findings can range from the very common, such as the

presence of a cataract, macular degeneration or glaucoma, to the more complex, such as inflammation of the nerves or even a brain tumour.

I am also a counsellor as I have to break bad news, such as the presence of a brain tumour, to a patient and his loved ones.

A typical day for me...

Starts at 6.15am as I am the family chauffeur. The work day for me begins before the clinic opens. I spend three to four hours each week conducting tutorials for medical students or residents at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. I may also attend meetings or catch up on my reading.

Then I either begin seeing patients at my clinic or will head to the operating theatre to do cataract operations. Sometimes, I go to the hospital wards to check on my patients.

Before I head home, I may run some errands or pick up any of my children who wants a ride home. If there is time, I try to sneak in a run around my estate. I look forward to dinner with my family. I usually like to end the day by reading or listening to soothing music.

I have come across all types of cases...

With patients of all ages and from all walks of life. Their problems range from double vision to peculiar visual phenomenon, such as seeing bright flashes of light.

One Christmas Eve a decade ago, I met a middle-aged couple at my clinic. The husband complained of having had year-long flashes of light, which did not improve despite visits to many eye specialists.

I found he had lost the side vision in both eyes and ordered a brain scan, which confirmed there was a brain tumour. It was heartbreaking to have to break such news during the festive season, but he heeded my advice to go for emergency brain surgery on Boxing Day to save his sight.

It was a success and he regained his side vision in both eyes a week later. Today, he is not only a grateful patient but also a friend.

I love patients who are...

Cooperative and work alongside me to improve their eye conditions, for example, by taking their medication as instructed.

People who get my goat are...

Those who do not render my nurses or staff their due respect.

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

Helping patients get back to their lives when their vision is restored, seeing the expressions of joy on a patient after cataract surgery, and just receiving a word of thanks from a grateful patient.

It breaks my heart when...

A patient loses his vision due to a delay in treatment or a lack of knowledge. For example, a patient with inflammation of the optic nerves can permanently lose his vision within 72 hours unless he receives urgent treatment.

I would not trade places for the world because...

I would never be able to find another job where I can be a surgeon, physician, detective and counsellor. I count it a blessing to be able to improve a patient's vision and, hence, make a difference in his life.

My best tip is...

Cultivate good reading habits – rest your eyes after every hour of intense near-vision work, such as reading on the computer, and go for yearly eye checks, especially if you have a family history of glaucoma or diabetes.

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