

WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE AND STYLE

PRESCRIPTION FOR CARING

Fertility specialist Ann Tan's compassion extends beyond babies to youths and women in need

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SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, Ann Tan vividly remembers coming home from work one day to her then two-year-old daughter, who ran excitedly to her for a hug. It was the height of SARS then. The toddler suddenly skidded to a stop and told her: "Mummy, I cannot hug you until you go shower." Laughs the veteran obstetrician and gynaecologist, "It was quite funny seeing her excitement turn into seriousness."

With the global Covid-19 crisis replaying the fears of SARS but multiple times over, Dr Tan is like everyone else – worried and uncertain. As a healthcare professional, she's not in the frontline but as a leading fertility specialist in Singapore, her own patients' well-being is at stake too.

Although she's seeing fewer patients with many deferring non-urgent treatments, "worrying for my pregnant patients or those trying hard to conceive – these all weigh heavily on my mind daily," she says.

At home, she worries for her two older daughters who are in lockdown in the US and the UK, and speaks to them over the phone every morning. Her youngest daughter is in Singapore. Her close interaction with patients and colleagues is also worrying for her octogenarian family members at home.

"It's tiring, but I just have to keep being mindful of what I do. I take my supplements, wear my mask, and wash my hands often. I take my temperature thrice a day. Before I leave in the morning and at least twice at work."

COMPASSIONATE DOCTOR

Still, she remains the face of calm and comfort - the guiding qualities that have helped her in her life's mission, be it in helping younger women with their gynaecology issues, older women trying to conceive or giving disadvantaged youths a leg up in society.

"I guess I'm nurturing by nature," she says. "My staff often say I spoil my patients. I thrive on thinking how I can help others."

Patients at her Women Fertility & Fetal Centre at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre tell of how she gives sound advice while



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being sensitive, and isn't one who pushes for unnecessary procedures. Because of the good rapport that she has with patients, many have become friends, even those whose baby wishes go unfulfilled.

Her days are filled with ups and downs, one moment congratulating a patient on the healthy growth of her baby, and consoling the next patient who loses hers. "I've learnt how to float," says Dr Tan, 57. "I try not to bring work home. It is not like I don't care, but I'm good at absorbing negativity without letting myself dwell on it."

The daughter of a chemistry professor and a civil servant, Dr Tan says her parents wanted her to excel but were never fierce or demanding. Her late mum, Tan Sau Fun, was the first and only female chemistry professor in Singapore. "She was happy when I received my scholarship to read medicine in Singapore and thereafter another for subspecialty training."

Also the former chief of Fetal Maternal Medicine at Singapore General Hospital, Dr Tan chose obstetrics and gynaecology because "You see happy people and the birth of a child is always a happy event. That was my naive viewpoint then as a medical student."

She counts herself blessed that her own pregnancies were relatively easy. Her daughters are now aged between 20 and 26.

With more women choosing to have babies at a later age, Dr Tan's work has been focused on increasing their odds of success. So much so that she's earned a strong reputation as one of the best fertility specialists in Singapore who can do 'magic'.

She is a strong advocate of social egg freezing – where the eggs of a healthy, fertile woman are stored till she is ready for pregnancy later in life. In Singapore, only women with specific medical disorders can undergo the procedure.

"I would love for women to decide on their own fertility, and that they can be in charge of their own eggs. Even if social egg freezing is allowed, not many women may do it, but it allows for them to think about trying for a baby earlier, because they will see how difficult getting pregnant sometimes is," she says. It is an idea that she has mooted to the relevant ministries for a long time, but nothing has come out of it yet.

Dr Tan has plenty of real life stories – both happy and sad - to share in the hope of persuading couples to have kids sooner than later. "I'm thinking if I should write a book. Perhaps I can call it 'The Trials of Trying to be

a Mum – the good, the bad and the joy'," she says.

WORKING FOR OTHERS

Outside of her day job, she wears several hats, mainly revolving around supporting young people in need and women's issues. Since 2013, she has been a board member of Halogen Foundation Singapore, a not-for-profit charity that reaches out to disadvantaged youths.

One of her pet projects is the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship programme which teaches young adults entrepreneurial skills and attitudes. "Through Halogen, I hope that our youths with less will not be left out. Plus interacting with them also keeps me younger," she says.

Dr Tan also serves on the Women's Health Committee under the Health Promotion Board and the Families for Life Council. This follows her tenure as president of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) from 2008 to 2010, when she was awarded

(1) Dr Ann Tan at her clinic. (2) Dr Tan (centre) was President of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations from 2008 to 2010. (3) Dr Tan doing an ultrasound.

the Public Service Medal for her efforts in addressing women's needs. At the time, she was in Association of Women Doctors of Singapore when it became a member society of SCWO. She was persuaded to help the SCWO, becoming its first vice president before being appointed president.

While there, her team launched the SCWO Service Fund which helps abused women and their families. The Women's Register, a platform for mentoring, networking and education was also relaunched during her time at SCWO.

"There are many women and men with whom I have had the privilege to meet and become friends with through all my social work and I find that truly a reward in itself. I would be lying if I said juggling social work, my clinic and family matters concurrently was easy. It's tiring but I'm thankful for these opportunities to serve in many areas to help me grow continually as a person."

Besides, she adds, "I have three daughters and I would like to see a world which accords women equal opportunities as men."

A SENSE OF STYLE

Whether at work or on the charity gala circuit, the always well-groomed Dr Tan projects a confident sense of style. She professes a soft spot for toga gowns, and nothing "lacy or flouncy, but sleek and edgy."

She supports local fashion brands such as Stolen and Ying the Label, but her true love is jewellery. "I can dress up a casual outfit with some small pieces of jewellery," she says. Even so, she draws the line at wearing jewellery at work, citing the time she lost her wedding ring when she had to remove it to prep for an emergency operation. It doesn't stop her from adding to her collection, though. "I use my girls as an excuse to buy jewellery," she laughs.

The dedicated physician sleeps with her phone next to her, and is no stranger to taking patients' calls in the middle of the night to make them feel reassured. The only time she gets away from work is when she goes away on twice yearly holidays with her family. She has been called away from movies, had to leave a cousin's wedding dinner midway to attend to a patient, and once turned up at the A&E in a ballgown before changing into scrubs for a surgery.

The good doctor wants to remind everyone, especially during the Covid19 outbreak, to be kind and eat well. "We are all human and the disease doesn't differentiate between persons."



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