



PHOTO: DESMOND LUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

BIO
BOX

Dr Ansgar Cheng

AGE: 46**OCCUPATION:** Prosthodontist at Specialist Dental Group in Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre

In a way, Dr Cheng has his elder sister to thank for helping him in his career choice.

As children living in Hong Kong, they were taken to the dentist by their mother. His sister had such a good time in the dentist's chair that it ended with her singing a song together with the dentist.

It dawned on Dr Cheng, who was nine years old then, that "it might be quite fun to do the same thing for a living too".

As a dental student, he spent time observing a prosthodontics-trained senior dental surgeon at a private clinic, who later became his mentor and first employer. The dental surgeon also wrote a reference letter for Dr Cheng when he applied to Northwestern University in the United States to pursue speciality training in prosthodontics.

Dr Cheng later trained in maxillofacial prosthodontics at the University of California, Los Angeles.

This sub-speciality involves the rehabilitation of patients with congenital defects in the head and neck area, or those who have developed disabilities in these areas due to disease or trauma.

He lived in Toronto, Canada, for 11 years. He ran a private practice and served as head of maxillofacial prosthodontics at the department of dentistry at Princess Margaret Hospital for a decade.

Dr Cheng, who was born in Hong Kong, holds Hong Kong citizenship and Singapore permanent residency. In 2004, he moved here with his wife and first child.

He co-heads Specialist Dental Group with another prosthodontist, Dr Neo Tee Khin. His 43-year-old wife also works at the group practice as the director of business affairs. Their two daughters are aged eight and nine.

Dr Cheng is an adjunct associate professor at the National University of Singapore and an honorary clinical associate professor at the University of Hong Kong. He is also a prosthodontics examiner with the Royal College of Dentists (Canada) and chair of the prosthodontics committee of the College of Dental Surgeons of Singapore.

A prosthodontist tells **Joan Chew** how he restores a patient's looks and ability to eat and speak

I specialise in prosthodontics because...

I love creating things with my hands and prosthetic dentistry involves the making of replacement teeth that look, feel and function like natural teeth.

I sub-specialise in the area of maxillofacial prosthodontics because this is a unique field that bridges medicine and dentistry.

Maxillofacial prosthetics is fascinating because...

There are no fixed rules in the delivery of treatment. Each patient is unique in terms of the extent of surgery he has undergone, the amount of healthy tissue left, the number of dental implants needed to restore function in eating, speaking and his facial appearance and the combination of treatment methods he needs.

One little known fact about maxillofacial prosthetics is...

It is a long-established dental speciality with hundreds of specialists trained all over the world, even though there are only a few of us in Asia.

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

Be an extreme makeover artist.

I help restore function and aesthetics to a person whose head and neck area have been ravaged by cancer or other congenital defects.

I am also able to help people who have poorly aligned teeth become confident about their smiles.

The difference between what I do

and a makeover artist does is that the improvement I make in a person's life is more than skin deep.

I enable him to regain his normal lifestyle in terms of his ability to eat, speak and participate in social functions.

A typical day for me...

Starts with reading two newspapers. During breakfast, I talk to my two little girls.

At my workplace, I first get an overview of the cases for the day. We currently have 10 specialists working together, so it is important to ensure that cases are well coordinated.

Clinical work is interesting and exciting. On a given day, I could be seeing a patient who is scheduled for an organ transplant and treating another patient who has flown here to restore his teeth with dental implants.

In between seeing patients, I read journals, write scientific articles or respond to e-mail messages.

My day ends at dinnertime with my family, which is another time I use to catch up with my wife and share thoughts with my children.

I enjoy running on weekends and sometimes jog home from work, a distance of about 4km from Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Orchard to Bugis. My wife takes public transport home, but on some days, I can get home earlier than she does.

I have come across all types of cases...

From people missing half their faces or mouths because of cancer surgery to young people born with missing facial or mouth parts.

During my residency days at the University of California in Los Angeles, I also saw patients who had tried to commit suicide by firing a gun into their mouths.

I love patients who are...

Able to benefit most from our treatments.

For example, patients who have

had a poor quality of life due to missing teeth or who have had devastating surgery in the head and neck area, will experience a significant improvement in their quality of life and everyday functions with new teeth customised for them.

Knowing that we are able to make such a tremendous and long-lasting impact in their lives is very precious and makes everything worthwhile.

Patients who get my goat are...

None. Some patients may need more tender, loving care, so it simply takes more effort on the part of the service provider. Patients who are more demanding also face many pressures of their own, so I remind myself not to take things personally.

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

Welcoming another day in good health. I am grateful for the blessings in life, including having a loving family and a great team of people to work with.

It breaks my heart when...

People fail to seek help for what is a curable or treatable problem due to a lack of awareness or having different priorities in life.

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

As a dentist, I have a good balance between work and rest. I also enjoy being able to combine private practice with teaching and academic research.

Meeting people from different parts of the world across different industries on a daily basis also makes life very interesting.

My best tip...

Don't forget to visit your dentist regularly to ensure that you have optimum oral health and that any potential dental or medical issues are identified and addressed early.

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