

THE MIDAS TOUCH

Surgeon. Mother. Volunteer.
Dr Karen Sng is a woman of many hats. **THIS** Quarterly talks to her and finds out how this young and talented doctor manages to juggle so many roles and responsibilities.

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Although slightly shy and uncomfortable in front of the cameras, when Dr Karen Sng sat down with us for the interview, any awkwardness quickly melted away as she warmed up to a subject especially close to her heart: her work.

“Many people think that plastic surgery is just all about improving another person’s appearances,” she says, “but that is far from true! In fact, I would dare say that cosmetic surgery makes up only about half of what I actually do every day. The other half of my work consists of reconstructive surgery: that is, surgery performed to restore both form and function to a part of the body that is abnormal.”

The good doctor’s professional credentials certainly reflect this balance as well. Aside from being the current President of the Singapore Society of Cosmetic (Aesthetic) Surgeons, Dr Sng is also the current President of the Cleft Lip and Palate Association of Singapore and Assistant Treasurer in the Association of Women Doctors of Singapore.

Although she now operates The Plastic Surgery Practice @ Orchard in Mount Elizabeth’s Medical Centre, Dr Sng did not start her long and illustrious career in medicine from there. When she first obtained her Health Manpower Development Programme (HMDP) scholarship, she chose to receive further training at the International Craniofacial Institute Cleft Lip and Palate Treatment Center in Dallas, Texas under the tutelage of Dr Kenneth E Salyer, one of the pioneers of craniofacial surgery, and Dr Carlos Raul Barcelo.

On her return to Singapore, Dr Sng was quickly appointed Consultant (and later, Senior Consultant) at the Department of Plastic Reconstructive & Aesthetic Surgery in Singapore General Hospital (SGH). Even after she broke away from the hospital to start her own private practice, as someone who places great emphasis on remembering her roots, she still maintains very close ties with the public healthcare sector as a Visiting Consultant to both SGH, and KK Women’s and Children Hospital.

But that is not where Dr Sng’s relationship with medicine really began. Dr Sng recalls: “I have always been interested in medicine even at a young age, probably thanks to my grandmother. Although there were no other doctors in my family, she had always encouraged me to pursue a career in medicine; and as I grew up and started seriously looking into the possibility of attending medical school, an old friend of the family – who happened to be a surgeon – invited me into the operating theatre to observe what it was really like for doctors. It was then that I really knew I wanted to be a surgeon.”

Still, it was not until she was looking at the various surgical specialties that she had finally decided on becoming a plastic surgeon. “Plastic surgery was especially interesting to me because it had a very wide scope. It is a specialty that both deals with the restoration of normality, form and function as well as the enhancement of that which is already normal. Not only do we get to treat patients who are born with facial deformities or people who have their facial bones broken after an accident, we also see patients who would like to enhance the appearance of their flat nose or who would like us to treat eye bags that have developed with age. Our knowledge and experience with treating what is abnormal helps us treat patients who request cosmetic enhancement.”

Does she think that being a female plastic surgeon has helped in any way? Dr Sng reflects for a moment: “Well, I don’t think it has helped me in any way on the operating table. There, it’s all about how attentive you are to detail, how meticulous you are about your work, how good your eye and sense of aesthetic is and so on. Regardless of whether you are male or female, what’s important is to be constantly willing to better yourself through critical introspection and self-reflection.



Outfit from CK



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“That said, however, I think that me being a woman and a mother has made it easier for some of my patients to relate to me. Some women feel embarrassed talking about some topics to a male surgeon, but with me they seem to be better able to relax and open up. I guess some women just find it easier to talk to another woman, be it about things like improving their skin or their bodies and so on.”

Dr Sng tells us that most of her patients are women, and that the part of the body that she most frequently gets asked to work on, is the breast. “Aside from size changes – and yes, there are women who opt for breast reduction surgery; when one’s breasts are too large for one’s frame, one may suffer from all manner of backaches and neck-aches in addition to a perpetual difficulty in finding clothes that fit – I also see patients who come in after having breast cancer therapy seeking for reconstructive breast surgery. However, I don’t think that the patients I see are necessarily indicative of plastic surgery trends in the general population. Maybe it’s like I said – that women are more comfortable talking to a female plastic surgeon about feminine concerns.”

Aside from breast surgery, Dr Sng also sees a lot of patients who have recently had children. The female body, she tells us, goes through a lot of changes during pregnancy: some of them from physical or mechanical causes, like the stretch marks left behind from the swollen belly, and some from the hormones coursing inside the mother during and after pregnancy. While not all of these changes are necessarily reversible, many of Dr Sng’s patients are looking for ways to revert their body to the way it was before childbirth.

Of course, not all of Dr Sng’s patients are women. “Some of my patients are babies who happen to be born with some kind of congenital deformity, like a cleft lip or cleft palate. My training and experience with craniofacial surgery in Dallas has helped me in treating these patients, and I do my best to try and improve their future quality of life however I can. As my mentor used to tell me, I should ‘treat the children of the world with excellence’.”

One can see Dr Sng’s commitment to improving her patients’ quality of life even outside of her professional life. As a volunteer, Dr Sng has travelled all around the world – from Myanmar and Indonesia to Laos and China – where she and other volunteer doctors would perform reconstructive surgery for absolutely nothing.

“I have recently been on a few missions with Operation Smile, where we would travel to developing countries and treat children there who are suffering from cleft lips and cleft palates. The first day

of every mission is taken up by screening the patients. The patients travel from near and far, some travelling for a few days in the hope of receiving treatment, some on land, some by boat. Unfortunately, though we wish it were otherwise, we cannot see and operate on everyone. This is why we have to screen the patients according to a variety of criteria, to better determine who can best benefit from our efforts. In the end, we will usually screen anything from 150 to 200 patients and schedule about 100+ surgeries over the next few days.

“Once the screening process is done, the team will usually spend some time setting up the operating theatre. The entire team is made up of a whole variety of personnel: from surgeons like myself to anaesthetists, pediatricians, dentists, speech therapists, nursing staff, biomedical engineers, photographers, medical records personnel, clinical coordinators, volunteer medical students and so on. Once the team has everything in place, we would spend the next five days or so operating and – whenever time permits – sight-seeing and bonding with the other members of the team. Finally, when everything’s done, there’s another day set aside for reviewing the patients, another day for packing everything back up, and then we’re back in Singapore.”

Why does she volunteer? Dr Sng says that part of the reason why she does it is because she is always gratified to see how much her work changes the lives of these underprivileged children. “I was first exposed to volunteer work as a trainee doctor, where several of the senior plastic surgeons that I would train under are all veteran volunteers. As trainee plastic surgeons, we were exposed to the culture of volunteer medical missions and constantly encouraged to go on these missions: first as support staff then, later, when we graduate as surgeons, as the surgeons actually doing these procedures.

“In Singapore, we do not see children running around with unrepaired cleft lips because our healthcare system allows us to provide these children with the necessary care required to repair these conditions. In the developing countries that these missions are taking place in, however, the families of these children lack the means or the resources to afford the surgery to fix these conditions. To be able to make a difference in the lives of these children, to be able to give back to the world however I can: I think that is what makes these mission trips so fulfilling. Of course, there’s also the invaluable friendships that we form with various members of the team, whether they are from Singapore, the host country or anywhere else.”

While Dr Sng does wish that there were more people active in the volunteering scene, she too understands that it is not easy for someone to just drop everything and go away for the nine to ten days that the mission would require. These days, it is becoming just as difficult for her to leave not only her practice but her husband and four-year-old son behind whenever she goes off on a mission (though she is grateful that her husband is supportive and willing to let her run off on these missions every once in a while!).

So what exactly does she do when she is not hard at work or off on a mission? “Well, as I have a four-year-old at home, most of my recreational activities are pretty much dictated by what my son likes to do,” Dr Sng says with a laugh. “Right now, since he enjoys swimming and going to the beach, that’s what my husband and I end up doing most of the time. My son is the funniest person I know: he’s very talkative, and prone to saying some of the most hilarious things. Just being around him is enough to help me destress and unwind from work.

“In my personal spare time, however, I try my best to keep fit and active by running and going to the gym. I also used to play golf, but I found that it took up too much of my time! I think that exercise is very important as not only does it help us keep the weight off, but it also improves our overall health, stamina and wellbeing. Frequent exercise also prevents cardiovascular disease and – for women in particular – helps with delaying the onset of osteoporosis.” ■

A woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling, wearing a shimmering gold sleeveless dress. She is standing against a light-colored wall, with her right hand resting on the wall and her left hand on her hip. The lighting is soft, creating a warm and elegant atmosphere.

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