



Dr. Haslina Recognized for Preventing Blindness by APAO

by Chow Ee-Tan

A calling that is close to the heart of Dato' Dr. Haslina Binti Mohd Ali is the prevention of blindness in Malaysia. And now, her years of dedication and service in providing vitreoretinal care has rightly earned the honor of being the 2021 recipient of the Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology (APAO) "Outstanding Service in Prevention of Blindness Award."

Dr. Haslina is the only vitreoretinal surgeon in the North Malaysia states of Kedah and Perlis. She has been instrumental in not only treating patients in Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah Alor Star in Alor Setar, but has also collaborated with hospitals around Malaysia.

She graduated from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) in 1989 and obtained her master's in

Ophthalmology in UKM in 1999. She then completed her fellowship in Vitreoretina at the Royal Liverpool University Hospital in the United Kingdom from January 2004 to April 2005.

When she started providing vitreoretinal services at the new turnkey Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah, she served patients from four states in the Northern Peninsula. With the presence of younger vitreoretinal surgeons in the state of Perak in 2011 and in Penang in mid-2014, she began focusing on serving these two states, which have a population of more than two million. Since then, she has remained the sole vitreoretinal surgeon in these two states.

"Two days per week, we run two vitreoretinal clinic rooms, one

preoperative clinic room and one anti-VEGF clinic room," said Dr. Haslina. "Before the COVID pandemic, we used to have between 80-130 patients per day and clinic [hours] used to stretch regularly up to 7:30 or 8 p.m.. We try to do as much as possible each day."

She also examines patients in the emergency clinic room on her clinic days. The waiting time for a vitreoretina; clinic is more than two months, but at times patients that need early intervention will be seen as soon as possible.

Lighting the way in vitreoretina

For the affable and down-to-earth Dr. Haslina, her interest in vitreoretina

started during her post-graduate years.

“My professor in vitreoretina was very encouraging and allowed us to do many things. Our head of ophthalmology services was also a VR surgeon and she made the path easier for me. I developed an interest in vitreoretina before I was a specialist.”

The longer Dr. Haslina worked as a VR-surgeon, the more she realized that there are so many needs. Diabetic retinopathy (DR) is a main eye disease encountered by vitreoretinal specialists. Thus, she said that there were active collaborations with the state’s Health Department, family medicine specialists, endocrinologists, and also feto-maternal subspecialists (obstetricians) to screen for DR.

“Many patients lost their sight due to vitreoretinal problems and diabetes. And many of them were young. So I thought what I was doing must be correct,” she says.

She recalls that when she was a fellow in Liverpool, she had two patients with very bad diabetic retinopathy. One was a young woman in her early 20’s and the other was a Pakistani woman who could not speak English well. Seeing and treating these patients for 1.5 years gave her the conviction to battle blindness.

“When I returned home, I wanted to give myself 10 years to try to decrease significant blindness. But 16 years later, I know I have failed,” she said. “I am seeing patients much younger coming in with really bad diabetic eye disease. The conditions are difficult and complicated and many of them are depressed because they can’t see.

“Unfortunately a substantial number of patients come late, and they expect miracles. I have tried to do as much as possible. Any one time I would have easily more than 250 patients waiting for surgeries and during COVID, it has increased,” said Dr. Haslina, adding that seeing her patients suffer can make her feel depressed.

No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has made things much harder for both doctors and the patients: “I was constantly worried that patients could not come to the hospital and that we

were missing out on urgent cases,” said Dr. Haslina. “Many surgeries had to be postponed. The waiting list spiked from 300 to 700 cases. Surgeries requiring general anesthesia could not be performed and we could only operate until 6 p.m.”

A continuing commitment

Throughout the years, Dr. Haslina and her team have been providing vitreoretinal care in other parts of Malaysia. One of her more unforgettable postings was working at Hospital Umum Sarawak from early 2018 to February 2020, which was halted due to the pandemic. She and her team worked there every four months in 2018 and then once every three months from 2019-2020. The monthly visits were rotated between Dr. Haslina and two VR surgeons from the states of Kelantan and Penang.

Another stint that gave her great satisfaction was providing ophthalmology services in Langkawi, an island in the state with a population of about 100,000.

“Together, with my doctors in the ophthalmology department, we traveled to Langkawi by ferry once a month. My initial excitement turned to a nightmare when extreme weather caused me to have severe motion sickness,” she recalled.

But that didn’t deter Dr. Haslina from carrying out her duty. The team started conducting cataract surgeries at the then new Hospital Langkawi and further increased their services by visiting the hospital for three days every three

weeks.

“We screened students for refractive errors and adults for cataract for three consecutive years. The high volume of cataract surgeries that were performed there at a regular interval managed to decrease waiting time for cataract surgery, from 10 months to six weeks after each exercise,” she said.

Dr. Haslina and her team also have outreach programs and work together with NGOs.

“We liaise closely with Rotary Club of Langkawi and they provided intraocular lenses for the poor there. The last high volume cataract surgeries were done last year in April as a shared project with the Ministry of Education. More than 80 patients were operated on.

“Our team also works closely with Yayasan Sultanah Bahiyah. The foundation provided a bus complete with equipment and instruments for mobile eye screenings for the Kedah state in 2017 — plus full-time staff who have been trained to capture and interpret fundus photos,” she said.

Dr. Haslina has also initiated a series of courses conducted by World Sight Foundation based in the U.K. This includes courses on orthoptics, ocular oncology and neuro-ophthalmology that were conducted in a few states in Peninsular Malaysia.

One area of work that brings her much joy and satisfaction is teaching medical officers (MO) in the master’s programs, and also servicing the MOs.

“I like teaching. To be able to teach and





motivate the younger generation is very gratifying, especially when you see them as specialists now.

"We seniors regularly emphasize to our young doctors to treat and speak to patients well, to work from our hearts, and to empathize. As head of the department, I used to interview candidates before they joined us to emphasize that hard work was expected of them and that ophthalmology is not a relaxing posting," she explained.

"They knew what they were getting into. We had excellent MOs who joined the master's program and are currently providing service to other hospitals. Nowadays, there are many young doctors who come to us as a transit before they get their actual postings. Most stay with us for less than eight months. But we continue to impart what we can.

"The young doctors who worked with us would remember what the seniors imparted on them. My advice to them is: Work with all your heart. So whatever they do, they will continue to spread to their juniors," she said.

Awarded for her efforts

Dr. Haslina will receive the APAO Outstanding Service in Prevention of Blindness Award in September 2021.

"I don't know what I did to deserve this," she said humbly. "But I guess when you have passion for your job, this is a bonus and a gift from God."

After serving the government sector for 31 years, Dr. Haslina decided to opt for early retirement in June this year.

"I'm not retired from ophthalmology and vitreoretinal services, but just retiring from government service," she clarified. "I still go to the hospital twice a week to do surgeries. And twice a week I go to an eye center in Sungai Petani and do vitreoretinal work as well.

"I have been doing the same thing for so long, I believe there is a time when you need to have a change," she shared.

Balancing career and family

Dr. Haslina is blessed to have a supportive husband who is her best friend, and three daughters aged 23, 25 and 27. Her eldest daughter is pursuing early childhood education and her second daughter is studying medicine. Her youngest is an architecture student.

She admits it's difficult to balance her career with her family. She has been dedicating a lot of time for work, as surgeries can stretch into the night. Plus, she could be on-call during weekends. "I am lucky that I have a very supportive husband and very forgiving children and they know that I love them," she quipped.

Dr. Haslina was an active member in the government's committee of Prevention

of Blindness. In recent years, she has taken a step back to let younger ophthalmologists helm the committee. She hopes that they will continue to be active in the prevention of blindness.

"In Malaysia, we need more general ophthalmologists, but we also don't have enough subspecialists. We definitely are in need of more VR surgeons. There are only 13 of us in the government sector, but a bit more in private practice," she said.

Dr. Haslina has always loved her job. And to her, learning is a continual process.

"I can never imagine not working. The ability to continue to learn new things and to make progress gives me inspiration and keeps me going," she concluded. 🌀

Contributing Doctor



Dato' Dr Haslina Mohd Ali is a consultant ophthalmologist and vitreoretina subspecialist based in Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah Kedah, a state in the Northern Peninsular of Malaysia. She started working at Hospital Alor Setar (state general hospital) as a general ophthalmologist in 1999 and subsequently pursued the vitreoretinal subspecialty at Royal Liverpool University Hospital in 2004. She has been providing vitreoretinal (VR) services since she returned, and remains the sole VR surgeon in Kedah and Perlis. She was head of the Ophthalmology Department at Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah from 2013 until 2020. She provided VR services in Sarawak for two years, a large state in East Malaysia, in rotation with two other VR surgeons, before the post was filled in July 2020, by one of her fellows. She also collaborated with an NGO Yayasan Sultanah Bahiyah for mobile screening in the state of Kedah. She was also previously a member of the National Prevention of Blindness and Cataract Outreach Committee. She has trained fellows in vitreoretina and postgraduate students, many of whom are now working all over the country. Dr Haslina is the recipient of the 2021 Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology (APAO) Outstanding Service of Prevention of Blindness Award.



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Dr. Haslina (seated) and her team at the Langkawi Hospital operating theatre in April 2019