

FELLOWS' FOCUS

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE



At the Retina Fellows' Forum, Lawrence P. Chong, MD, opened up about his life and work.

BY FERHINA S. ALI, MD, MPH

In January, second-year vitreoretinal fellows from institutions across the country met in Chicago, Illinois, for the 16th annual Retina Fellows' Forum. Attendees gathered to learn the latest approaches to the management of retinal diseases and complex surgical retina cases from our mentors and to get a preview of future treatments in the pipeline. The highlight of the conference was the keynote speech by Lawrence P. Chong, MD, of the VMR Institute in Huntington Beach, California.

There is no shortage of words to describe the journey to becoming a vitreoretinal surgeon: rigorous, inspiring, humbling, thought-provoking, and also algorithmic. Internship follows medical school, residency follows internship, and, finally, vitreoretinal fellowship follows residency. In his talk, titled "My Near-death Experience: What I Learned as a Patient," Dr. Chong encouraged us to take a step back from the traditional lenses through which we view our training and careers and to consider a different point of view. He shared

his personal journey following a devastating cycling accident in which a car struck him and his wife, and she tragically lost her life.

The next several months of surgeries, recovery, and rehabilitation changed Dr. Chong fundamentally. He encouraged the graduating fellows to think about what makes a life and career meaningful, while himself exemplifying fortitude in the face of tragedy. *Fellows' Focus* spoke with Dr. Chong further after his talk, and an edited version of his remarks is presented here.

Your experience was one that must have prompted great reflection. If you were speaking with someone early in his or her career, or if you could do it all over again, what would your advice be? What about for those midway through or in later stages of their careers?

Lawrence P. Chong, MD: Early in your career, spend as much time on your family and spouse as you do on developing your career.

Focus on time management. You can't do everything, so concentrate on what's most valuable. Budget your

time on paper. Out of a 5-day work-week, ideally 40 hours are for sleeping, 40 hours are for working, and 40 hours are personal. This is hard to achieve for a retina specialist, but recognize that it's a zero-sum game. Increasing time in one area comes at the expense of another. Prioritize and don't waste time.

In your midcareer, surround yourself with talented younger people who can teach and challenge you. Involve yourself with strategic initiatives for your personal career and your practice. Get involved in local and national organized medicine.

Later in your career, enjoy the fruits of your labor and enjoy your grandchildren. Begin planning an exit strategy. Hopefully, you will have had balance between work and personal life, and your life will not totally be defined by your work.

How did your priorities shift after your accident?

Dr. Chong: I thought I was going to work forever, but I think a life fulfilled should be like a story: It should have a beginning, a middle, and a



Lawrence P. Chong, MD, addresses attendees at the 2018 Retina Fellows' Forum.

great ending. Thinking of a life beyond my career has become a reality.

What was the transition back to patient care and surgery like for you, specifically related to readapting to clinic and/or surgery?

Dr. Chong: In the hospital, I had to learn to walk and talk again. Fortunately, I did not have to relearn how to see patients and operate again. I was a little nervous my first day back in the OR, though, and I felt like a fellow again.

Early on, I would tire more quickly. Prior to my accident, it was easy to operate for 8 hours straight, but it took a while for me to get back to that. My back had never ached before, but it did early on—especially on scleral buckle cases.

How has your experience since informed your patient care? Are you able to relate to your patients differently?

Dr. Chong: I have much more patience with my patients: I am a better listener; I am more sensitive to the pain and discomfort that they feel; I have a better understanding of how powerful fear can be, even if that fear is not based in reality. Many of my patients now have my cell phone number because I learned to appreciate quick access to my own physicians.

For much of your career before the accident, you were in an academic setting. Now you are part of a private practice. What insights can you share on the differences in the two settings and your experience with each?

Dr. Chong: I loved academics. I was surrounded by bright colleagues, fellows, and residents. It was exciting every day. I liked the variety of activities, such as teaching, operating, seeing patients and clinics, administration, and research. I really left the academic setting to spend more time with my wife because she was going to retire this year. I didn't know that I had only a limited amount of time left with her, but those were the best 5 years of my life.

Now I enjoy the direct interactions I have with my patients, which are unbuffered by my previous coterie of

LESSONS LEARNED

A few of Dr. Chong's insights from his experience following the accident:

- Friends and family are the most important things in life.
- The kindness of strangers can be amazing.
- There is no better profession than to be a physician.
- Nurses are really important.
- Post traumatic stress syndrome is very real and debilitating.
- Surviving is not necessarily being brave or strong; it's just finishing the next thing you have to do.
- Sometimes it's better to be lucky than to be smart.
- When you have lost hope, be contrarian.
- Women are the stronger sex.
- Don't waste time. You can't get more of it.
- Life is about choices, and I have chosen to be as happy as I can.

fellows, residents, and medical students. There is less coverage and, in some ways, more work for me. I have a close relationship with my office staff, which is much smaller, as well as my colleague at the VMR Institute, Jerry Sebag, MD. They all supported me during my recovery and were amazing.

Do you still cycle?

Dr. Chong: Yes, I bike 40 to 70 miles a week. Curiously, I don't fear for my own safety, but I worry about those I ride with, especially if they are following me.

Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Dr. Chong: I would just like to tell everybody to live every day like it is your last. Look in the mirror in the morning, and, if you are not living the life you want to live, then change it. Enjoy every day of your life, and don't wait for a tragedy to realize your sources of happiness. ■

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