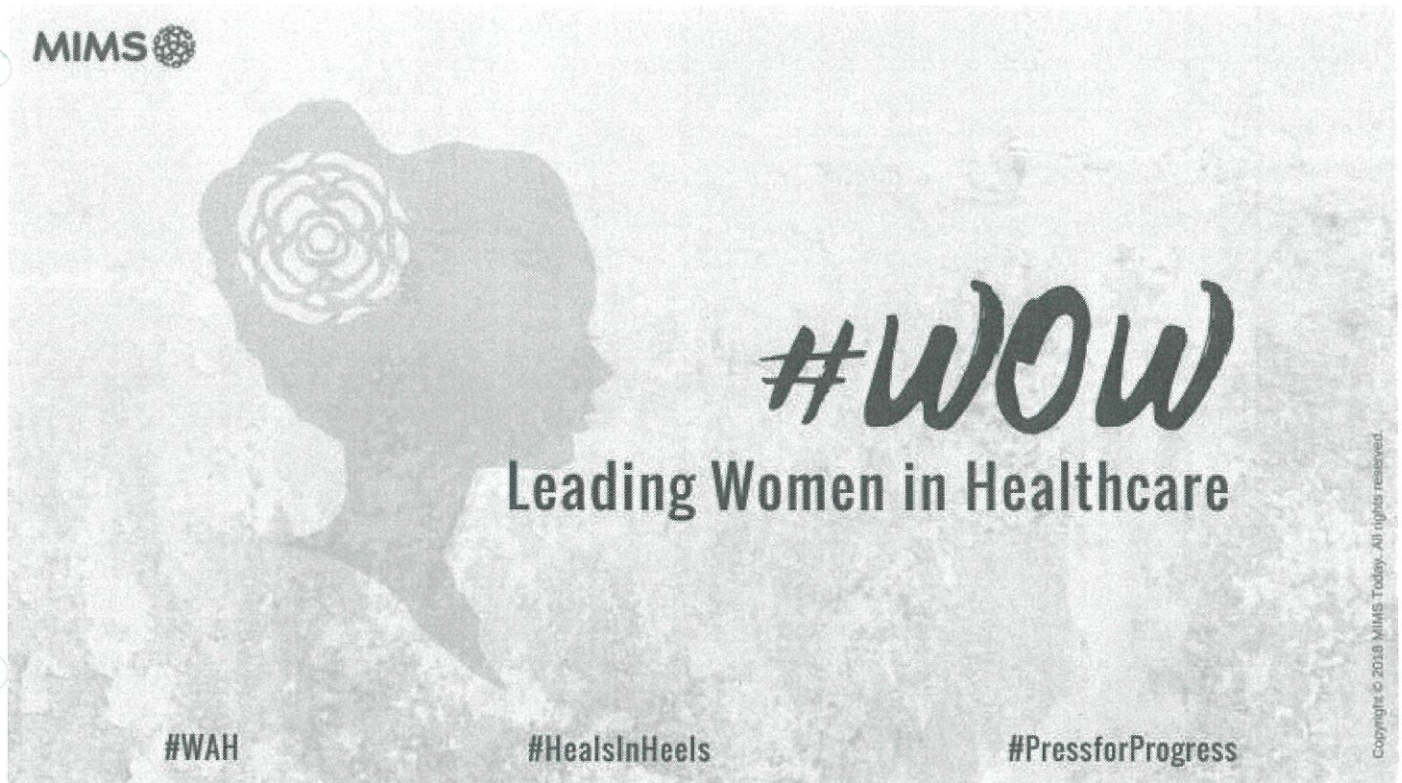




Home / Interviews

#WOW: Leading women in healthcare — Dr Christina Ng Van Tze

Dr. Nor Anisa Hanan, O.P. Jade, Yesterday



#WOW: In conjunction with this year's International Women's Day, MIMS Today will be featuring a series of amazing, empowering stories—dedicated to our women in healthcare. Layout design: Brenda Lau, MIMS

In conjunction with the International Women's Day—a global event celebrated on 8 March annually—**MIMS Today's** editorial desk is proud to present seven profoundly inspiring stories for the entire month of March. Putting forward the notion that “women are healers”, we bring to you our **#HealsInHeels** special feature—capturing a month of amazing, empowering stories—dedicated to our women in healthcare.

Our highlights of *Part 1* are four leading women in healthcare who have contributed to the country's firsts, who are inspiration to many and who are making waves in the healthcare industry. They are showing the world that they are women of worth—symbolising a **#WOW** force of nature not to be meddled with. Our next guest in the #WOW series is **Dr Christina Ng Van Tze**, Consultant Medical Oncologist, and the Founder and President of EMPOWERED.



In 2013, Dr Ng was honoured with the “Great Women of Our Times” Award by Women’s Weekly for her cancer advocacy work in under-privileged communities. Photo credit: Dr Christina Ng

One on one with Dr Christina Ng

Cancer is a physically and emotionally draining disease. Facing a cancer diagnosis can be devastating, and a patient may experience for instance, intense emotions ranging from the initial shock to fear, sadness and anger. “When you do not know what you are up against or how to fight it—you are bound to be overwhelmed with fear,” echoes Dr Ng.

An active figure (and voice) in EMPOWERED since the beginning—championing efforts and awareness campaigns—Dr Ng has been awarded for her continuous work in channeling access to life-saving colorectal cancer screening, and treatment programmes, for under-privileged communities (which has since reached over 100,000 Malaysians who fit the criteria)

and qualified to join the colorectal cancer campaign).

In 2013, she was named one of the “Great Women of Our Times” by *Women’s Weekly*—an accolade further recognising her relentless commitment and contributions for cancer advocacy.

Nonetheless, in recent years, she has been letting her team members to take on the ‘front wheel’. “Having a good team—having the next generation of people to run it—is good. Allowing them to take on more responsibility is also what I’m trying to do at the moment. As this gives me more time to take a breather,” expresses Dr Ng, who had no prior experience setting up an NGO, when she decided to establish EMPOWERED.



As Dr Ng echoes, the journey with EMPOWERED has not been smooth, but with passion and sincerity things will work out in the end. Photo credit: EMPOWERED

1. Share with us your journey—how did you get to where you are today? What is your biggest motivation and inspiration—especially to really be involved in oncology and eventually setting up EMPOWERED.

When it all began I was still at UMMC, very involved in the public healthcare system. So, setting up EMPOWERED was very timely as I was just leaving the public healthcare system so this was a nice opportunity to continue with the community service. We've accomplished so much since 2009 by getting teams of volunteers involved not just with the registration but also providing instructions, education and support from the beginning until the very end when they complete the cancer surgery and cancer treatment. It has been a very meaningful

outreach with a lot of field work and direct contact with the beneficiary and target groups.

It's an interesting area from a medical stand point. There's so many perspectives and angles to address in a cancer illness. Medically it's a very stimulating area for me as a doctor, but professionally it's a very exciting area because there's so many social, emotional and psychological angles that are of equal importance that allows me to try to fill in the gap. And I think EMPOWERED can play an important role in this area of oncology care.

I'm a very practical person, and I like to be hands on. I think if you want to help people, do it in a practical way. So, this is also how we run our projects at EMPOWERED.

2. Throughout the journey, what are the challenges you had to face as an oncologist, or with EMPOWERED.

Sometimes when you go into a poor income community, there are so many things to consider such as their culture, which may be very different from yours. There are also social perspectives, religious sensitivities and family expectations among other things. As you enter into a community, you need to consider that they may not just accept what you are doing, although it is for their own good.

Then there are political obstacles between the factions, so we need to understand the demographics and work with the key groups that make decisions, that have influence and who can help us penetrate into the community. It's a very complicated process, doing this kind of advocacy work because we enter into their lives, their homes, knock on their doors, come face to face with them. We've got to have a lot of think tanks to figure out how to actually do this.

3. What are your hopes and dreams for the future of oncology in Malaysia, and for EMPOWERED?

As our target groups have always been the under-privileged, the poorer income and less educated community, I hope that with time, more within this group will have greater enlightenment of colorectal cancer and what the disease is all about, the causes, what they can do, their role to play in prevention and intervention and their responsibilities for their own health. As they grow in their journey, they could also take better care of their health.

4. Your proudest moment—as a woman in healthcare...

Well, there are so many milestones, actually! [Smiles] I would say some of the happiest moments are witnessing projects ever so successfully launched and executed, seeing the beneficiaries expressing their thankfulness towards the volunteers, towards the programme, and then receiving good responses from our professional doctor volunteers, collaborators in healthcare, collaborators in the community, as well as people wanting to support this project—year after year. Many donors and collaborators continue to support us—and that to me, personally, is a testament to the fact that the projects have been real and meaningful.

As an oncologist, my happiest (proudest) moments are when I see how satisfied my patients are with the care and holistic approach. Sometimes, when the news is not so good—but, when families feel happy because of the good support they receive from you—I believe this is pretty satisfying as well, as a doctor. I suppose you can call 'these' as my series of continuous happy moments! [Smiles]

5. Any advice or words of wisdom to those who aspire to follow your footsteps?

Honestly, what I do is very much a passion because I love doing this kind of work. This kind of NGO work requires good and sincere people. You must be very sincere if you want to do this.

EMPOWERED: Gathering momentum in its drive to raise awareness of cancer

In 2007, Dr Ng launched her book entitled *My Journal*, in 2007—with the aim to empower and educate patients on chemotherapy for cancer. The publication is available in four languages (English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil), allowing access to Malaysians from all ethnic backgrounds. Over 10,000 copies have been freely distributed to government hospitals with cancer centres.

When asked about the involvement of women in Malaysia's healthcare scene, Dr Ng believes that there should not be any 'gender preference' or specifications when it comes to healthcare—"as long as he or she is a good doctor and can contribute equally."



(centre) YB Datuk Seri Dr Hilmi bin Haji Yahaya, Deputy Minister of Health officiating the 6th annual Colorectal Cancer Awareness, Screening and Treatment Project in PPR Desa Tun Razak, Cheras, Kuala Lumpur on 3 April 2016. Photo credit: EMPOWERED

Every year, EMPOWERED, in collaboration with the ministry at the primary and tertiary care level, pushes for bigger and better outreach to more Malaysians—through their signature campaign, “Colorectal Cancer Awareness, Screening and Treatment Project” (CCASTP). “If we have HCPs in other regions, we would be more than happy to collaborate because we need hands and feet. We need people who believe in this kind of screening, treatment and support for the colorectal project, and other cancers as well, in order for us to reach out to more under-privileged communities throughout Malaysia,” expresses Dr Ng. **MIMS**

Don't miss out the inspiring story of our next #WOW leading woman in healthcare—to be revealed on 14 March. More updates on MIMS Malaysia Facebook page—your platform to Engage, Inform and Inspire.