

Cancer explorer

Haematologist Daryl Tan tells **Joan Chew** how blood cancer treatment is undergoing breakthroughs like never before

I specialise in haemato-oncology (blood cancer) because...

This is perhaps the most dynamic field in medicine right now.

Cure rates and prognosis of different types of blood cancer, including lymphoma, leukaemia and myeloma, have improved dramatically over the past five to 10 years. More targeted and safer chemotherapy drugs have also been developed.

Unlike solid organ cancer, blood cancer tends to be more sensitive to drug treatment.

Finding a cure for many of these diseases in this lifetime is promising and I want to witness these major breakthroughs.

Treating blood cancer is fascinating because...

The line between terminal cancer and potentially curable cancer is becoming blurred with the availability of new drugs and the integration of research into clinical practice.

Patients whom we previously thought would never recover now gain a new lease of life with the help of novel drugs.

One little known fact about haemato-oncology is...

Blood circulates around the entire body, hence all types of blood cancer have usually spread by the time they are diagnosed. But even at the advanced stages, they are all potentially curable.

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

An explorer. Being a physician involved in clinical research allows me to prescribe new drugs to patients who could not benefit from conventional treatment.

As they are frequently the first patients receiving such drugs, it certainly feels like I am an explorer who is venturing into uncharted territory and searching for new lands.

A typical day for me starts...

At 7am when I take my children to school. I begin my ward rounds at 8am, before starting my clinic at 9am.

I spend a lot of time counselling and educating patients on their



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conditions. I also discuss their treatment options with them.

On some afternoons, I carry out research and attend to my patients who are participating in a clinical trial.

I also travel overseas frequently for investigators' and advisory board meetings. These are important for me to keep abreast of the latest developments in haemato-oncology and to identify important new drugs to treat blood cancer.

After work, I play with my kids. I also run about 10km thrice weekly as I participate actively in competitive running events. Outside of Singapore, I do adventure sports such as scuba-diving and mountain trekking.

I have come across all types of cases...

Including leukaemia and myelodysplasia – a group of disorders where a malfunction in the bone marrow produces immature blood cells.

There are two types of blood cancer – the chronic cases, which are usually incurable and terminal, and the acute cases, which are curable.

Research now aims to prolong survival for the chronic cases and increase cure rates for the acute cases.

I have seen how treatment paradigms have evolved. We used to hit diseases hard with intensive chemotherapy and stem-cell transplantation, but now we hit them smart with targeted, new drugs.

As a result, many elderly patients, who were previously excluded from receiving intensive chemotherapy due to their potential intolerance of the side effects can now be treated with many of these smarter drugs.

I love patients who are...

Pro-active and read up about their conditions. This really facilitates discussions on treatment options which are best suited for them.

Patients who get my goat are...

Those who are impatient and have unrealistic expectations.

Although patients may experience complications and side effects of treatment, such as nausea and hair loss, blood cancer is potentially treatable and a lot of patience is required.

**BIO
BOX**

Dr Daryl Tan

AGE: 39

OCCUPATION: Specialist in haematology and consultant at the Raffles Cancer Centre

ABOUT HIM: When Dr Tan was a haematology trainee a decade ago, he had to tell a patient with newly diagnosed chronic myeloid leukaemia (a type of cancer of the white blood cells) that he had between three and five years to live.

Today, Dr Tan could tell the same patient that his disease is not too different from a chronic illness such as diabetes.

Progress made in haemato-oncology (blood cancer) is what drives Dr Tan, who has led more than 15 clinical studies, to explore novel treatment for the disease.

He is an editorial board member of the American Journal Of Blood Research and reviewer of several medical journals.

He practised at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) for 10 years before joining Raffles Hospital last November.

He continues to engage in research and clinical studies in SGH as a visiting consultant and is part of the Pfizer Clinical Research Unit at Raffles Hospital.

His wife, 38, is also a doctor. They have a seven-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son.

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

Seeing patients respond and improve with treatment.

It breaks my heart when...

A patient whom I think may benefit from a trial drug is excluded from participation because he does not meet the protocol criteria, yet he does not have other treatment options.

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

Helping patients recover from diseases that were previously considered formidable is rewarding.

Besides, it is a privilege to be part of major medical breakthroughs that may create history.

My best tip is...

For patients to have an open mind. The best treatment for blood cancer now requires collaborative effort among physicians, the industry and academia. Only then will the patient be able to have the best available treatment.

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