

My Life as a Surgeon – Capturing Stories. Capturing Lives.

Incorporate a rich and fulfilling personal life with a broad and deep surgical career

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A Consultant Surgeon who specialises in vascular, arterial and venous diseases, shares with us how she incorporated a rich and fulfilling personal life with a broad and deep surgical career.



I graduated from Sydney University in 1979, trained at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPA) in the 80's, got my FRACS in 1986 and many say that I walked away from a star career in surgery to find a balance in my personal life. I must say I never faced sexual harassment, or racial discrimination although I am Chinese and a woman but being 31 when I had my Fellowship (young by today's standards), I wanted to have a family and I was worried about having no prospects in sight.

I therefore quit my job as senior registrar at RPA and did a locum in Surgery in Papua New Guinea, then another locum in Cairns where I started a practice in General Surgery in 1987. Cairns was a medical "outpost" in those days, no CT scanner, no ICU, not even air conditioning in the surgical ward of the public hospital, and no vascular surgeon. As I had done quite a lot of vascular work, and almost a year of cardiac surgery, I did an amazing amount of vascular surgery and was a welcome addition to the surgical workforce.

When I arrived, I was amazed to be asked to put AV fistulas into 20 year old indigenous patients, and I asked why it was that there was so much of this, along with a truly tragic rate of amputations in relatively young people. A renal physician came to Cairns in 1991, and Cairns went from having no dialysis unit, to having the second largest unit in Queensland in no time at all, with a parallel explosion in need for vascular surgery. This problem of severe diabetic complications of diabetes in young people has still not been adequately addressed.



I had two children, lived in a rural place about 80km from Cairns for a few years, but never stopped running a very broad general and vascular practice based in Cairns and several district hospitals including Mareeba, Atherton and Innisfail. I set up a program to perform endovascular AAA repair in Cairns in 2000, and we now are able to perform EVAR, FEVAR (with support), TEVAR etc. My daughter is about to graduate in Medicine from James Cook University (JCU), and my son is a law student at Australian National University. For many years, I was secretary of the regional swimming association, and

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was actively involved in organising and running competitive swimming events here and in Brisbane.

Since 2006, I have improved my skills in endovascular surgery, and in 2013, I decided to stop performing general surgery altogether, and now only practice in vascular and (increasingly) endovascular surgery. Mind you, I still do parathyroidectomies for the renal unit (a growing demand since the government stopped allowing the use of Sensipar).



Together with Prof Alan de Costa, I have helped to set up the cadaver based Anatomy of Surgical Exposure course at JCU. We are privileged to have a number of general surgeons who trained in South Africa, and this course aims to introduce candidates to the broad spectrum of open surgery that some of us have been privileged to perform in careers not so constrained as many are forced into these days.

I think my career illustrates how it is possible to incorporate a rich and fulfilling personal life with a broad and deep surgical career. Also, it is possible with the help of continuous life long education to change the direction and focus of one's surgery to fit in with changes in technology, personal interest and needs of the community.



The only thing that limits a person in surgery is a fixed view of what one sees as the goal of the career. New opportunities come up every day to all of us, and with passion and commitment these can be converted into rewarding career and life changing experiences.

