



STICKING TO HIS GUT

WORDS
SARIWATI
LATIF

Colorectal surgeon Francis Seow-Choen is all about digging in his heels and making a difference, whether it is in his professional life or his personal passions.

LINEN JACKET,
ERMENEGILDO ZEGNA.
COTTON SHIRT AND
PANTS, HUGO BOSS.

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SINGAPORE
BOTANIC
GARDENS

They're not pests, they don't harm humans...nobody cares if they live or die. People like us who have the interest and want to understand what God has created, how they interact, why they're here, and what they're here for – we pursue such interests.



COTTON SHIRT
AND LINEN
BLAZER,
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ZEGNA.

Above all else, colorectal surgeon Dr Francis Seow-Choen sees himself as a citizen of our planet and understanding its workings is what drives him. “We *must* be involved with the world,” he stresses.

He walks the talk, and travels the world sharing his knowledge and expertise on colorectal surgery with peers and students in the field of colorectal surgery.

With equal vigour, he has pursued his personal fascination with the world of insects. It began as a wide-ranging interest in all ‘creepy crawlies’ as a child. “Since I was young, I’ve always been interested in animals,” he says with a smile.

His mother was his partner in crime when it came to catching bugs, but his father, who was “a bit fierce”, much preferred Francis to hit the books instead of gallivanting in search of invertebrates. The occasional beatings did not cool his interest and his father grew to accept his love for animals, even building cages for his pets.

Francis gradually narrowed and deepened his focus to that which interested him the most: stick insects, or *Phasmatodea*. Years of research and fieldwork in Singapore and Borneo led to four published books about these insects which are also known as ‘walking sticks’ or ‘stick bugs’.

His most recent book, *A Taxonomic Guide to the Stick Insects of Borneo*, was

released in June 2016, and published in collaboration with the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. The beautifully presented pictorial book describes 337 species – of which 52 are new. There are more than 3,000 known species in the world.

Not surprisingly, his work has seen him welcomed into the ranks of professional researchers in institutions such as the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum and the National Biodiversity Centre.

Top name in the game

With 30 years of colorectal surgical experience under his belt, Francis’ impressive curriculum vitae – which includes helping to set up Asia’s first colorectal surgery department at the Singapore



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General Hospital (SGH) in 1989 – speaks for itself.

When he first joined the then newly set up colorectal surgery department at SGH, most people's first reactions were of disbelief. "They asked: 'Why did you join? You'll only be doing backside cases,'" he recounts with a grin. He did not share those sentiments.

Being a pioneer meant more leeway to excel; at the time, there weren't many colorectal surgeons in the world. "You can do much more with fewer people competing with you, and you can become more of an expert," he points out.

"It's better to be in a small pond than a big sea. And that has proven correct. Over the past years, we have become quite prominent internationally. Singapore started only two years ago, and is already among the countries doing the most robotic colorectal surgery. I believe I have done the most in Singapore."

The country's reputation in the field of colorectal

surgery can be attributed to the cutting-edge techniques that he and other colorectal surgeons in Singapore have designed over the years.

These include robotic colorectal surgery, transanal resection of rectum (which helps preserve the anus for cancer patients), use of a videoscope in the treatment of anal fistula (a small channel that can form between the end of the bowel and the skin near the anus, causing bleeding and discharge) and the use of staplers for haemorrhoidectomy (an operation to get rid of piles).

All these methods are minimally invasive and have reduced the pain that patients previously endured, "giving better results, less pain and fewer scars," Francis explains.

Spreading his wings

Despite being in private practice, he believes in sharing his expertise and making connections across borders, in keeping with his philosophy



COTTON
T-SHIRT,
BALLY.
POLYESTER
WINDBREAKER
AND COTTON
BLAZER,
HUGO BOSS.



of being a citizen of the planet. He holds leadership positions in professional bodies, has authored hundreds of papers and chapters for medical journals and textbooks. He has also scored a number of professional 'firsts', among them his founding of the Eurasian Colorectal Technology Association, which seeks to tighten ties between Asia and Europe in colorectal surgery.

With so many accomplishments, one might expect him to cut an intimidating figure. Instead, one encounters an easy-going professional with a face accustomed to smiling and laughing, which puts his patients at ease.

While talking about haemorrhoids in his Orchard Road clinic, Francis uses the word "*buasir*", the Malay word for this condition. His next few sentences are uttered in Malay and Bahasa Indonesia.

"When I left medical school, I couldn't speak to patients," he says, referring to the significant

number of Indonesian patients he has treated or encountered. "I thought that I'd better pick up (Bahasa) since it's the lingua franca of the region."

To this world-renown surgeon, the ability to put patients at ease is as crucial as technical knowhow. "The skills of the doctor are important. Many patients would rather see a less skilled but competent doctor who can sympathise and empathise with them rather than the most competent doctor who totally ignores them, or has no bedside manner."

Success and self-determination

It was luck and capability that led Francis into his profession. Medicine – one of the most difficult courses to be accepted into – was his last option for university admission because science and chemical engineering appealed more. But after his sister convinced him to make medicine his first choice, he appealed to the

Dean of Medicine, was granted a place, and the rest is history.

"I am a very determined chap who cannot sit idly by. If I do something, I want to make sure that I know the most," he says. "I want to steer the boat. Cruising is not an option because you are led by the waves."

"If you are steering, you can go against the current or you can steer in the direction you think it should go in. It might not be the most natural position but if you read the tides correctly, it should be the best direction."

This applies to his professional field as well as his personal tribute to stick insects. "My wife always says: 'Why don't you just keep one or two (insects) like others? Why must you be the expert?'" he says, laughing.

His decision to specialise in stick insects is similar to the motivations behind his career progression. Having a key area of focus means he can dive deeper, learn more and make a greater impact.

Why stick insects?

"The professionals don't study stick insects. They're not harmful, they're not pests, they don't harm humans. There is no money involved in studying them, unlike mosquitoes and ants. They're just there, nobody cares if they live or die, or how many species there are. So people like us who have the interest and want to understand what God has created, how they interact, why they're here, and what they're here for – we pursue such interests.

"They're so unique," he stresses. "They have the ability to regenerate lost limbs. Females can produce offspring without a male to fertilise the eggs. The eggs laid are clones of the females. When they hatch, they will all be females. It's a female society. In some species, males have never been found. They have never had males."

His fascination and love for nature and all its creatures is palpable as he speaks. "As a citizen of planet Earth, it's so interesting to be discovering what's there. Some of the things we've found! The one-time longest insect in the world was found by me about 15 years ago, and it was listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. I found it in Malaysia and it measured 55.5cm from the front leg to the back leg.

"My interest is also in bringing nature to people and people to nature. I've given a lot of public lectures, and usually kids are very willing to touch. It's the parents who will go 'eh, no no it's very dangerous, it's too frightening'.

"Children nowadays, in Singapore especially, don't have much interaction," he says. "A lot of Singaporeans think that cats are dirty, dogs are dirty, chickens are dirty, everything is dirty; they only want to live in a concrete jungle. And that's quite sad.

"As world citizens, we should be educating people. They think that it's safer to clear out the jungle and build houses, but they don't realise what they lose."

He is all for a touch-and-feel approach to natural history, saying that "you develop an interest in these things only if you go out there". Citing an example, he says his children were bored during a bird-watching session but got excited about catching insects. The sense of touch, he maintains, is crucial to developing a bond with or love for nature. "If you want to like something, you must be involved and interacting. If you actually touch something, it's a different experience."

Getting involved

This firm belief is mirrored in another of his personal causes.

"One of my schoolmates is blind and has a guide dog but he was having a hard time in Singapore to bring his dog on the bus, MRT or shopping. He asked for help to start an association with the authorities and business owners involved, and regulations set in place."

Francis did just that – he became Founding Chairman of the Guide Dogs Association for the Blind and held the post for more than 10 years. The association is still bringing in guide dogs for blind people.

Surgery gives us our sense of self-worth. While others have no power over people's bodies or lives, surgeons do. That is a very solemn and sacred responsibility, so I'll continue doing it as long as I can.

The father of three is laid-back at home, with his wife complaining that he was like "Superman trying to rescue the kids" each time they were being disciplined as young children. Now grown-up, his children have taken on their own disciplines: a surgeon, a lawyer and a design engineer.

Into the future

The balance of work and life will shift for Francis in the coming decade, with more time devoted to entomological work, and some surgery if health permits. "Surgery gives us our sense of self-worth. We're able to help people beyond what others can do," he says. "While others have no power over people's bodies or lives, surgeons do. That is a very solemn and sacred responsibility, so I'll continue doing it as long as I can." 🌀

WOOL-BLEND
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SQUARE. LEATHER
BELT. HUGO BOSS.



DR FRANCIS SEOW-CHOEN'S MOST RECENT BOOK, *A TAXONOMIC GUIDE TO THE STICK INSECTS OF BORNEO*, WAS RELEASED IN JUNE 2016, AND PUBLISHED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE LEE KONG CHIAN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM. THE BEAUTIFULLY PRESENTED PICTORIAL BOOK DESCRIBES 337 SPECIES, OF WHICH 52 ARE NEW. THERE ARE MORE THAN 3,000 KNOWN SPECIES IN THE WORLD.

