



Dear Colleague

What's new at Braemar?

Neurosurgeon Peter Gan has joined Braemar Hospital. He describes the challenges and high-points of specialising in the most complex organ in the human body.



Peter Gan's career inspiration came early – and from an unusual source. "As a child growing up in Malaysia, I decided at around 8 or 9 that I wanted to be a doctor. Then I read an article in Reader's Digest written by a neurosurgeon and I made up my mind there and then that was what I would be."

In fact, he says, the magazine article should have put him off. It painted a compassionate but candid picture of an American neurosurgeon's life. The subject of the story, was divorced (divorce rates are very high among neurosurgeons); he was married to his work, and sleep-deprived. But the young Gan was inspired. "I was thinking, 'why the heck am I choosing

neurosurgery on that basis'? But it didn't stop me."

A decade later, aged 18, he left Petaling Jaya in Malaysia to complete his A Levels in Britain before beginning his medical degree at the University of Glasgow followed by specialisations in neurosurgery at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham and paediatric neurosurgery at Birmingham Children's Hospital. A year in Canada followed where he specialised in all forms of paediatric neurosurgery including craniofacial surgery which deals with deformities of the skull and face.

He then returned to Birmingham, where he worked as a consultant neurosurgeon until his appointment to Waikato Hospital neurosurgical team in March, 2013.

At Braemar, his work encompasses all his speciality fields including elective cranial and spinal procedures which include tumour surgery, procedures which deal with cerebrospinal fluid disorders such as Chiari malformation and hydrocephalus, elective neurovascular procedure such as clipping of aneurysms and routine spinal procedures. He will also offer intracranial endoscopic procedures for minimally invasive surgery once the equipment is available.

He says while private neurosurgery is a relatively new speciality in the Waikato, it is a growing and exciting field and the standard of care and facilities at Braemar are attracting patients from a wide area. Constant breakthroughs in technology and techniques mean surgeons can operate with greater precision and success even on the most complex cases. Functional MRI scans, for example enable surgeons to accurately identify which areas of the brain are involved in a particular mental process, thus making it easier to pinpoint areas to avoid. Endoscopy ensures minimally invasive surgery, allowing for shorter operations and a quicker recovery time. "In some cases, the time for an operation has dropped from around four or five hours to 35 minutes."

Mr Gan says while neurosurgery is a challenging field, because of the technical skills required, it is also very rewarding. "The brain is a very complex piece of machinery. Every brain is different: the shape, the size and the angles. It is the same with the spine. There are so many procedures. You never get bored."

Like other neurosurgeons he is concerned with some of the trends in lifestyle that contribute to brain bleeds and strokes.

The Lancet reported recently that strokes are increasingly affecting middle-aged and young people and that globally, 83,000 people, aged 20 or younger suffer from stroke every year.

Mr Gan says in New Zealand more young Maori are suffering from brain bleeds, due to high blood pressure. "A large number are in their thirties and forties, as opposed to the Caucasian population aged in their sixties and seventies."

Only lifestyle changes will make a difference, he says. "It is a condition of an unhealthy lifestyle. A lower socio-economic group tends to smoke and drink."

He would love to see New Zealand become smoke-free.

He says in Glasgow, where he studied, people smoked heavily. "Glasgow is a typical Scottish city. They drink and smoke very heavily." But when the Smoking, Health and Social Care Act was introduced in 2006, the effect was dramatic. There was an immediate reduction in incidence of heart attacks and cerebral infarction (ischemic stroke) in the Scottish population.

While at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, Mr Gan was principal investigator for the international STASH trial involving patients who had suffered subarachnoid haemorrhages (bleeding from rupture aneurysms which are weaknesses at branches of the blood vessels of the brain). Such bleeds can cause reduced cerebral blood flow which leads to high rates of disability as a result of a stroke. The trial involves patients being given cholesterol-lowering simvastatin for 14 days after the rupture. The data from the trial is still being processed, and it will be two to three years before the long-term results are known, but he said it is hoped the medication will improve the patient's outcome. "A lot

of patients – one study said up to 75 per cent – who have a bleed don't go back to work again. If this changes the outcome, it will improve their quality of life, their recovery and their work/life balance."

Peter Gan is enjoying the change of lifestyle in New Zealand, and also his work, which allows him to do a range of procedures. He says one reason he came to New Zealand was because he was increasingly frustrated by the bureaucracy of the British public health system. "The public system is massively under-funded. A lot of cases are cancelled. It becomes too stressful."

His own life is busy, he says but – unlike the author of the Reader's Digest article – he is happily married and enjoys his family life, with his son, 5, and daughter 8. He also plays squash and badminton and reads "everything from fiction to theology to Chinese books."

He speaks five languages and uses most of them every week. "I speak Mandarin and Cantonese to my brother and sister who are in New York and Hong Kong respectively; I speak English to my wife and kids, because my wife speaks Hokkien, which I can understand but don't speak very well, and I speak Hainanese to my mother who is in Malaysia." He can also speak Malay.

He has never regretted his early decision to specialise in neurosurgery. "For me, as with most neurosurgeons, this is not just a job. It is with you for life."

Kind Regards,



Dr Greg Spark – Deputy Chairman

Mr Peter Yee Chiung Gan

Qualifications

MB ChB (With Commendation) 1995 Glasgow
ECFMG 1998 USA AFRCS (Surgery in General)
1998 Edinburgh FRCS (Neuro) 2004 Edinburgh
CCST (UK) (Neurosurgery) 2005 Paediatric
Neurosurgery Fellowship 2006 Vancouver,
Canada

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Areas of Specialisation

- Adult Neurosurgery
- Neurovascular, Neuro-Oncology,
Cerebrospinal Disorders
- Chiari Malformation and Syringomyelia
- Pain and Spinal Surgery

Specialist Training

Bachelor of Medicine Bachelor of Surgery
(With Commendation)

University of Glasgow, Scotland

Associate Fellowship in Surgery in General
from Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh
Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, Scotland

Fellowship in Neurosurgery from Royal
College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh,
Scotland

United Kingdom Certificate of Completion of
Specialist Training in Neurosurgery

The Specialist Training Authority of the
Medical Royal Colleges, England

Fellowship in Paediatric Neurosurgery

British Columbia Children's Hospital,
Vancouver, Canada

Positions & Memberships

Consultant Neurosurgeon, Waikato Hospital,
Hamilton

Member of the Society of British Neurological
Surgeons

Member of the Neurovascular section of the
Society of British Neurological Surgeons

International member of the Congress of
Neurological Surgeons, USA

Member of Royal Australasian College of
Surgeons

Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of
Edinburgh, UK

Currently Working at Braemar Hospital?

Yes

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