



Dr Tan Siak Khim, who is known as Singapore's grandfather of aesthetics, counts his two years as a flying doctor in the remote jungles of Sarawak after he completed his housemanship as among the best years of his life. He later went on to specialise in dermatology before finally settling in Singapore, where he set up a successful aesthetics clinic, which he sold for an eight-figure sum. He and his wife now run a lifestyle group of companies. ST PHOTO: ZHANG XUAN

It Changed My Life

Getting under the skin of the good doctor

Aesthetics pioneer S.K. Tan talks about building a lifestyle empire and philanthropy



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A sly smile hovers over Dr Tan Siak Khim's lips when asked how old he is. He tries to prevaricate before volunteering sheepishly: "I just turned 72."

Septuagenarians would be proud to have him as their poster boy. Well-groomed and spiffily turned out in a fitted shirt and tailored pants, he looks at least a decade younger.

Then again, it shouldn't come as a surprise, not when we are talking about Singapore's grandfather of aesthetic medicine.

The founder of the JYSK Group, which has eight lifestyle companies spanning the cosmeceutical and pharmaceutical industries as well as engineering and food and beverage, he also started Derma-RX and The DRx clinic, which he sold to a multinational corporation for a whopping eight-figure sum in 2010.

Other notches in his belt besides aesthetic pioneer and go-getting entrepreneur? Flying doctor, Malaysian national bowler, certified tattooist and philanthropist.

Not bad for someone who was born and spent his early years in the sleepy state of Kedah in north-west Malaysia.

The only child of a storekeeper and an English teacher, he was packed off to Penang to attend Penang Free School – the oldest English-medium school in Southeast Asia – when he was 10.

He lived with a family which offered boarding for students and shared a room with three other youngsters. Because his mother was quite the disciplinarian, he relished the freedom.

"As an only child, I was quite sheltered and mollycoddled. Being away from home allowed me to run wild," he says.

However, there was a downside. "I didn't really develop a strong bond with my parents," he laments. Although rambunctious, he was academically able and earned himself a government scholarship to study medicine at the University of Malaya.

Being a doctor, however, was not a burning childhood ambition. In fact, he was not particularly ambitious growing up. "I just went with the flow," he says.

Life on campus, he recalls with a grin, was a blast.

"I was a member of a pretty notorious bunch of students in med

school. There were eight of us: We smoked, drank, gambled and made the most noise."

Letting out a sigh, he adds: "Not many of us are left. Quite a few have passed on from various causes."

He graduated in 1971, and spent a couple of years completing his housemanship in Penang before he was posted to the remote jungles of Sarawak as a flying doctor.

Every couple of weeks, Dr Tan would also fly into remote areas in helicopters manned by young American soldiers fighting in the Vietnam war.

"There was no data, no GPS in those days, and the pilots had to fly blind, but they were very good."

Referring to the Penans and other native tribes he used to treat in the jungles, he says: "Each time they saw a helicopter, the whole village would come. The treatments were free, but they'd bring and pay you with chickens, wild boar meat and sultan fish, you know, the fish that people here pay \$1,000 for."

He also ran a 40-bed jungle hospital in Limbang, one of 12 administrative divisions of Sarawak, where he was based.

Although located in a remote area, the hospital was well-equipped and even had a small operating theatre where Dr Tan performed procedures, both minor and major, including appendix operations and even amputations.

"I had to try everything because if I didn't, they would die. The only way out of the jungle was to airlift them and it wasn't easy," says Dr Tan, who also has a bachelor's degree in surgery.

The couple of years he spent there were his best, he says.

"What I did was so different from other doctors. I learnt so much. You realised how frail human life was."

Dr Tan, who was a national bowler for Malaysia, was next posted to a hospital in Kuching, where he quit after a year. By then, he was married to a teacher.

After a short stint as a general practitioner in Penang, he left for the St John's Institute of Dermatology in London, where he financed his studies by working as a locum.

He returned to Malaysia after a couple of years to join his father-in-law, who ran a practice specialising in dermatology and venereology, the study and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.



Dr Tan and his wife, Janifer, have funded initiatives to "feed, house and educate" underprivileged children in the Philippines, Indonesia and Mozambique. They are seen here with Filipino beneficiaries in 2012. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SK. TAN

Singapore's "grandfather of aesthetics"

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In the early 1980s, he moved his family to Singapore because of Malaysia's national language policy, which saw Malay replacing English as the medium of instruction in schools.

"My children couldn't cope," says Dr Tan, who has a daughter and a son, now in their late 30s and early 40s.

"They were too young to be sent abroad, so I thought moving to Singapore was a good compromise," he says.

In Singapore, he approached a friend – who owned a group medical practice – for a job.

The friend advised him against it. "He showed me a board with the names of all the doctors in his practice and said: 'These are all the doctors I have. I don't care about qualifications and experience. Everybody starts at the bottom. When do you think you will reach the top?'"

He adds: "We're still very good friends. I met him recently and told him that I would not be where I am if not for him."

Dr Tan later joined a small practice called Island, owned by the late poet-doctor Goh Poh Seng.

Within a year, the group – which had three clinics – went broke. Roping in a friend as a guarantor, he got a bank loan, took over the business and closed two of the three clinics, retaining just one at the Hilton Hotel.

"I was lucky I had friends who were willing to stick out their necks for me," he says.

He beavered away and his reputation as a good skin doctor soon spread.

The 1990s rolled around. Judging by trends in the West and the number of patients who consulted him for dermatological problems, he became convinced that Singaporeans would welcome medical advice to help them look good.

He passed his successful clinic to his partner.

"I had gone through hardship before and knew how hard it could be for young doctors."

Biting the bullet, he then opened one of Singapore's first aesthetics clinics, The DRx, in Forum The Shopping Mall in 1998.

"A lot of my friends said I was crazy. 'How to make money from just aesthetics? You must do other things,'" says Dr Tan, who has authored several papers on skin and dermatology published in international journals.

He ignored the naysayers and stuck to his guns.

One of the first local doctors to be certified by the American Board of Anti-Aging Medicine, he travelled all over Europe and the US for training.

"Aesthetic medicine was still in its infancy and you had to go overseas for training. In those days, it was not competitive, so the gurus were happy to train me," says the member of numerous medical associations, including the American Academy of Dermatology, the International Society of Cosmetic Laser Surgeons, and the International Academy of Cosmetic Dermatology.

Besides the clinic, he also launched a range of skincare products, Derma RX.

"My philosophy is like this. You

cannot be doing lasers and Botox 11 all your life, right? But good products you can use all your life," says Dr Tan, who worked with researchers and manufacturers on his skincare range.

He even flew to Hawaii to become a certified tattooist because he noticed a trend in medical tattooing, a non-surgical solution to help surgery patients or trauma survivors to feel whole again. An example is inking nipples on mastectomy patients.

"I've not tattooed anyone but I do a lot of tattoo removals," he says with a laugh.

Derma RX and The DRx clinic went from strength to strength.

He credits the success to his second wife, Ms Janifer Yeo-Tan, whom he married 11 years ago, after his first marriage broke down.

"She introduced spa services. She realised there was a market for people who didn't just want to look beautiful but also wanted to be pampered."

The couple – who have a six-year-old daughter – then moved The DRx from Forum to Tong Building, also in Orchard Road, where they occupied a whole floor.

In 2010, The DRx became the first aesthetics practice to be sold to a multinational for a whopping eight-figure sum.

Dr Tan could have happily retired but he didn't.

Instead, he and his wife set up the JYSK Group, which now has eight lifestyle companies, including the IDS (Innovative Dermatological Solutions) aesthetics clinic located in Novena Specialist Centre.

Other businesses include Illustris, an outfit which does research in molecular delivery technology headed by Dr Jacob Waugh, formerly a senior scientist at Stanford University's School of Medicine.

The group, run by Ms Yeo-Tan, who is the chief executive, also operates several restaurants and bars in Kuala Lumpur, including Mr Chew's Chino Latino Bar in the tourist precinct of Bukit Bintang.

Time away from work is spent with 11 godchildren, most of whom are from single-parent families. Two of them are the children of a friend whose husband was killed during the Jakarta riots of 1998, and two are the children of an employee who suddenly died of a brain aneurysm.

"My wife has a soft spot for children because she herself went through abject poverty in her childhood," he says.

Besides helping to put these godchildren through school, Dr Tan and his wife would also take them on holidays.

In the last decade, the couple have also supported many initiatives helping thousands of underprivileged children in the Philippines, Indonesia and Mozambique.

"We focus on feeding, housing and educating abandoned and neglected children," he says.

There are no plans for retirement any time soon.

"My wife is a workaholic. I'm a workaholic. I wouldn't know what to do with my time."

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