

**JUDITH TAN**  
juditht@sph.com.sg



ST FILE PHOTO

# More than meets the eye

Dr David Chan,  
ophthalmologist and  
medical director of Atlas  
Eye Specialist Centre



PHOTO: DAVID CHAN

#### What conditions do you see?

From simple ones like viral conjunctivitis to severe traumatic injuries to the eyes. My sub-specialty is in refractive surgery, which focuses on helping patients gain independence from glasses through surgery.

I also deal with complex cases of cataract surgery, and repairing damage to the front portion of the eye.

#### Folks tend to get ophthalmologists, optometrists and opticians mixed up. What do you do exactly?

All three, to varying degrees, are involved in patients' eye health.

It takes one 11 to 13 years to become an ophthalmologist. Should he decide to extend his training, and pick up advanced surgical skills and techniques to deal with complex problems, he would be looking at another one to two years.

He's pretty much the oldest student amongst his contemporaries.

#### Do eyeballs feel like skinless grapes?

Not really. The eyeball is tougher than we realise.

I once had a patient suffer a two-inch nail penetrating the orbit of the eye. The eyeball was intact, with the nail tip just millimetres from the optic nerve. The nail was safely removed, and the patient escaped with vision unscathed and was back to work in a couple of weeks.

#### Do eyeballs fall out of their sockets?

Yes. Once, a mentally unstable patient removed his own eye with his bare hands. Unfortunately, it was too late to save the eye and he ended up with a prosthetic.

The key to salvaging the eye is to

ensure that the optic nerve is still attached to the back of the eye. All other structures including ligaments, muscles and the bony orbits can be surgically repaired.

#### What is the grossest case you have dealt with?

A patient came in at the end of a long day with a "swollen" eyelid. It initially sounded like a garden-variety stye. But under observation, it had eyes and legs that were wiggling happily.

What I found was a very well-fed tick that had latched onto the upper eyelid. I unceremoniously dislodged it with a pair of forceps.

#### Any truth in the old wives' tale about eating carrots for better eyesight?

There are studies that have shown that vitamin A can have beneficial effect to eye health in many ways.

Statistically, significant benefits have been shown in the prevention of age-related macular degeneration, improvements in patients suffering from dry eyes and slowing the progression of peripheral vision loss of patients with retinitis pigmentosa (a chronic hereditary eye disease characterised by black pigmentation and gradual degeneration of the retina).

Carrots, among other foods like sweet potatoes and kale, are good sources of vitamin A.

#### We're curious. If Lasik is that good, why do most doctors still wear eye glasses?

Many people assume that there must be something very wrong with laser vision correction if there are eye doctors still wearing glasses. It's a fair perception but one that requires closer examination.

It must be understood that laser

eye surgery is a very safe procedure, provided the right patient is selected. Often, this requires an eye assessment to rule out problems that may lead to an unsuccessful outcome.

Also, the patient must be clear that laser vision correction merely helps him gain independence from spectacles or contact lenses. If an individual is happy with his spectacles or contact lenses, he might not necessarily see any tangible benefits in having laser eye surgery.

Similarly, many patients benefit from laser vision correction differently, from helping them do their jobs better, to performing sports at a higher level or just enjoying the convenience of not having to wear spectacles and contact lenses.

Doctors are no different than anyone else. Some may have eyes that are not suitable for laser vision correction, while some are happy with their spectacles or contact lenses.

What is certain though, is that statistically, doctors – as a community – have a higher percentage of having had laser eye surgery compared to the population as a whole.

#### Is it possible to get eye infections from the strangest sources? How bad it can be?

Eye infections can be picked up via physical contact. This includes the run-of-the-mill pink eye, viral conjunctivitis and more serious ones that spread as a form of sexually transmitted disease.

With mascara or false eyelashes, we do regularly see patients suffering chemical burns to the external surfaces of the eyes. It can be painful, often described as a burning sensation.

Fortunately, with timely treatment, patients often make a full recovery within a week.