

# The road less travelled

**Professor Narci Teoh has come a long way since watching her father work as the first obstetrician in their part of Malaysia**

**P**ROFESSOR Narci Teoh has a simple message for students and interns: "Have a go, and take the road less travelled."

It's certainly a philosophy that has worked for her so far.

Narci Teoh is a clinician-researcher specialising in digestive and liver disorders. She is professor of Gastroenterology and Hepatology at the Australian National University in Canberra. Shortly she will begin her term as president of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia (GESA) – only the second woman to do so in the GESA's 56-year history.

Her interest in medicine began very early.

"My father was the first obstetrician in the west of Malaysia," Professor Teoh tells the *MJA*. "Back in the dark old days when there was very little access to obstetric care for women. My mother was a pharmacist. So, I was very inspired by what my parents did for our community, and that grew into my own desire to help people."

At the age of 15, Professor Teoh and her sister started boarding school at St Catherine's in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

"We were thrown in the deep end a bit but it was a good thing," she says. "It had its challenges but I remember it as a wonderful time."

Encouraged by "excellent" science and maths teachers, Professor Teoh concentrated on the biological sciences and after graduation went on to study medicine at the University of Sydney, where her interest in gastroenterology was sparked "pretty early".

"Mentorship was so important," she tells the *MJA*. "My first clinical tutor was Tim Heap, a gastroenterologist now retired. Then it was Daniel Stiel at Royal North Shore who was inspiring. Today I still look to him – I've always admired what a consummate physician Danny is –

clinically, his bedside manner, his humanity and compassion, his sense of fun."

Royal North Shore proved to be fertile ground for Professor Teoh – she was there as a medical student, an intern and she did her advanced training there as well. Additionally, she spent rotations in Taree and Port Macquarie in regional NSW.

She hopes she is now a mentor for her current students, trainees and colleagues, particularly women.

"There are not many role models [for women]," she says. "I was lucky to have the late Pauline Hall, who was a liver pathologist. She was wonderful for me, personally and professionally."

***"We used to have a joke that you'd walk into a room full of gastroenterologists and it would be a sea of blue blazers"***

The gender split in gastroenterology these days is, according to Professor Teoh, about 25% women. "Much better than when I started," she says. "Back then it was about 7% or 8%.

"We used to have a joke that you'd walk into a room full of gastroenterologists and it would be a sea of blue blazers. The ones with flair were the women in their brightly coloured dresses."

While women can still find gastro training demanding – "there's still some after-hours work, not as heavy as it used to be, but still on-call, like the surgical registrars" – gastroenterology has a reputation for a healthy culture of support for women.

"Our professional society, GESA, has a steady stream of superb women selected to contribute to leadership roles, for example, on

the council. GESA has always fostered diversity."

Professor Teoh's current research is concentrated in two areas: liver cancer and fatty liver disease.

"I'm interested in liver cancer pathogenesis – what happens at the cellular level, what drives the transformation of hepatocytes, and how can we slow that process down or preferably abrogate cancer development altogether," she says.

Research is an important part of her career, and has taught her new skills.

"I am very grateful for my clinical training, because it informs my research," she says. "I am a different person [because of the research], and I have grown professionally and personally because of it.

"I will encourage students and trainees to give research a go. It teaches you how to evaluate, read information critically, and how to communicate."

If handed a magic wand, Professor Teoh said her priority would be to increase equitable access to gastroenterological care for people living in regional and remote Australia.

"We have fantastic services and top-quality care, but there is a lack of specialist personnel and easy access to health care and services in rural Australia. People living in remote areas deserve the opportunities that other Australians have," she says.

On 22 August Professor Teoh takes over as the president of GESA. Access to care is a big-ticket item on her agenda for the next couple of years.

"We have a great council – a diverse, very energetic, wise team," she says. "I'm really looking forward to it."

**Cate Swannell**

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