

# Medical Express



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*Understanding the basics of prostate cancer*

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*Department of Urology, Singapore General Hospital*

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# A Guy's Guy

Multi-award winning urologist Dr Gerald Tan has got your man's health covered

Dr Gerald Tan with Professor Ash Tewari receiving the Clarke Medal & Cutler's Surgical Prize for innovations in robotic prostatectomy from the President of the Royal College of Surgeons of England

## A Guy's Guy

by Maripet L. Poso

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**DOCTORS ALWAYS KNOW** how to make light of circumstances. It is part and parcel of their profession to help them deal with intense situations. However, interviewing Dr Gerald Tan, Consultant Urologist at Gerald Tan Urology + Robotics in Mount Elizabeth Hospital, rather convinced me that urologists, in particular, are the bunch with the greatest sense of humour. "You can't take anything too seriously if you are staring up private parts all day long," he shared. Don't be fooled by his light-hearted banter, though – Dr Tan knows exactly when to get down to business.

Armed with 17 years of experience and numerous awards for his contribution in the field of robotics and

urology both in Singapore and abroad, Dr Tan is definitely your guy when it comes to men's health. Dealing with cases from as simple as kidney stones and bladder concerns to more serious ones like prostate cancer and erectile dysfunction, Dr Tan is one of the country's sought-after urologists.

For this issue, we are honoured to feature this brilliant young doctor who is as passionate about men's health as we are at *Ezyhealth*.

**Ezyhealth: Have you always wanted to become a doctor?**

**Dr Tan:** My father was a self-made man from Swatow province, China, who immigrated to Singapore at the

age of seven in the 1940s during the Japanese occupation. Through sheer grit and hard work, he put himself through medical school and subspecialised in ophthalmology, being one of the first eye surgeons in private practice in Singapore. As a youth, I was privileged to follow my dad around the hospital. I was mesmerised by the high drama of surgeons practising their craft daily in the operating theatres, being heroes working under bright lights and saving lives.

With my parents' kind support, I had the privilege of going on to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh, UK, where I continued my fascination with surgery under the



influence and guidance of charismatic surgeons. They didn't just teach anatomy and physiology – they lived it, breathed it, celebrated it. With their confident swagger, ability to make snap decisions, relentless pursuit of opportunities to become technically excellent in their chosen craft, and ability to have a jolly good time despite punishing working hours, I knew I wanted to be like them when I grew up. I just didn't know which surgical specialty, and it took me a long journey to discover my career in urology.

**Ezyhealth: Among all the surgical specialties, what attracted you to urology?**

**Dr Tan:** Urology is the best surgical specialty for a tech junkie! It covers the whole spectrum of challenging open surgery, delicate reconstructive microsurgery, and was one of the first specialties to embrace minimally invasive and robotic surgery that allows surgeons to operate through small incisions. As a resident rotating through the various surgical departments in Singapore General Hospital (SGH) and Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), I was always envious of the urologists. They always had the latest “toys for boys” – lasers, endoscopes, shockwave machines for blasting stones that is akin to playing battleship, and of course, the ultra-cool da Vinci surgical robot. But most of all, what really attracted me to Urology were the surgeons, who seemed to have it all – happy personal life (thanks to a relatively light emergency load in our specialty), loving families, and a great sense of kinship and camaraderie amongst the surgeons despite coming from different institutions.

**Ezyhealth: You are well known not only in Singapore but also internationally for your significant contributions and awards for innovations in minimally invasive robotic surgery for prostate, kidney**



*Dr Tan receiving the Ferdinand Valentine Fellowship in Urologic Research award from the President of the New York Academy of Medicine – the first surgeon in 42 years trained outside North America to receive this award*

**and bladder diseases. Please tell us about them.**

**Dr Tan:** I was fortunate to be the first urologist in Singapore to pursue a dedicated two-year fellowship in robotic urologic surgery at Weill Medical College of Cornell University, New York City, in 2008 to 2009. At that time, the da Vinci robot had just exploded on the surgical scene, and urologists were devising new techniques to deliver superior outcomes for complex surgeries. After completing my fellowship, I returned to TTSH in 2010 where I helped establish the da Vinci robotic urology programme there. It was an incredibly fulfilling period in my life – I helped proctor my fellow urologists in their robotic surgeries, and was involved in disseminating these skills regionally as course director for workshops and courses in robotic urology and invited speaker. I was also immensely lucky to perform many surgical firsts in TTSH – the first robotic partial nephrectomy for early kidney cancer, the first robotic cystectomy for aggressive bladder cancer, and the first robotic pyeloplasty

for pelvi-ureteric junction obstruction of the kidneys. These pioneering efforts culminated in my being named the Outstanding Young Urologist of Asia in 2012 by the Urological Association of Asia, a cherished highlight of my surgical career to date.

**Ezyhealth: You specialise in urology and men's health. What do you think sets your practice apart from others?**

**Dr Tan:** Two simple words – it's possible. The most priceless lesson of my two-year fellowship at Cornell working with some of the best robotic surgeons in our field, was the epiphany that surgery for many clinical scenarios which are deemed as too difficult or too dangerous, is actually safe and effective if the surgeon has the right experience and a well-thought out approach. As one of the local pioneers in this new generation of da Vinci robotic surgeons, I am glad to be able to offer my patients the latest in surgical technique and evidence-based practice, with the benefit of tapping on international experts for



**Top:** Dr Tan receiving the James Syme Medal for academic excellence for innovations in robotic prostatectomy from the President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh – the first surgeon trained outside the UK to receive this prestigious award **Bottom:** Dr Tan receiving the GSK-AACR Outstanding Clinical Scholar in Cancer Research Award from the American Academy of Cancer Research

their input as well when required.

Also, despite having a really loud bellowing laugh, I actually am a very good listener. Once I can understand what is really bothering my patient, I will in most cases be able to offer a solution for his problem(s). The art of listening is oftentimes lost as surgeons are quick to categorise patients as medical issues to be fixed, when many times the primary issues may not be medical, but family or relational in nature.

**Ezyhealth: What are the common conditions that you treat in your clinic?**

**Dr Tan:** As a urologist, I deal with problems of the kidneys, bladder,

prostate and urinary tract. I also treat conditions of the male genital tract. Common conditions that I see on a daily basis would include blood in the urine, painful or difficult urination, kidney and urinary stones and infections, and cancers of the prostate, kidney and bladders.

For men's health issues, I deal with erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, male ageing and testosterone deficiency syndrome, and requests for male sterilisation (vasectomy) or its reversal.

**Ezyhealth: When it comes to men's health, what is the number one condition that men should be wary of?**

**Dr Tan:** Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men in the United States, Europe and Australia. It is the third most common cancer in men in Singapore, accounting for 12% of all cancers diagnosed in men here. With widespread health screening using serum prostate specific antigen (PSA), most men with prostate cancer are being diagnosed nowadays at an early stage where long-term cure is a realistic goal through either surgery or radiation.

There has been a lot of controversy recently over the use of serum PSA screening. Many of its critics point to the overdiagnosis and overtreatment of early prostate cancer, which in many cases may not be of immediate harm

and may take years to spread. However, what has not received enough attention in the media is the fact that as urologists, we now have very good clinical evidence and guidelines to advocate active surveillance for these early low-risk prostate cancers as a safe and effective approach. This means that men with low-risk prostate cancer may now be observed closely without need for immediate intervention, thereby giving these patients peace of mind that their prostate cancers are being monitored, and definitive treatment will only be introduced when their cancers show signs of turning aggressive.

**Ezyhealth: You are a staunch advocate for men's health. Please share with us some of the projects you're involved in?**

**Dr Tan:** In Singapore, "good work will always invariably be rewarded with more work". I currently serve on the Executive Committees of the Singapore Urological Association (SUA) and the Singapore Men's Health Society. Both societies have packed annual calendars comprising public health talks and symposia, as well as courses and workshops for our trainees and colleagues to improve and exchange expertise on the latest surgical techniques and approaches. Most recently, I helped out as the Scientific Co-Chairman of the SUA's annual scientific meeting called the *Urofair 2013*, where I served as the Course Director for a series of workshops in robotic and minimally invasive surgery for kidney, bladder, and prostate cancers. It was incredibly exciting to bring together some of the internationally renowned authorities in our field to Singapore to demonstrate live cutting-edge surgeries, and didn't feel like hard work at all! In fact, we were probably more like a bunch of technology geeks getting together to exchange tips on improving our game! eh