

Flight surgeon breaks barriers in ophthalmology career: treating cataracts and president of Taiwan

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Wayne Fung visited the doctor twice a week when he was 10. Intravenous injections kept his asthma under control. He warmed to the office nurse, whom he called â??Ducky,â?• because she was the best at hitting the arm vein in his thin torso. Watching these events, his mother proclaimed, â??I think one day YOU will be a doctor!â?•

That was 1944 in Vallejo. Fung spent more than 50 years as an ophthalmologist, in private practice and with the California Pacific Medical Center, retiring seven years ago. And it was a stellar career.

He was the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from The American Academy of Ophthalmology. He specialized in problems of the retina, the thin layer of tissue at the back of the eye that converts light into neural signals recognized by the brain. He focused on diabetic retinopathy and cataracts.

â??In humility,â?• said Fung, now 86, â??being one of the first in the area to do small incision cataract surgery, intra-ocular lens implantation and performing vitrectomy surgery (removing fluids within the eye) were where I could be called a leader.â?•

He has published about 32 articles in major, peer-reviewed journals and from 1990 to 1992, he was the elected president of the Retina Society.

The presidentâ??s personal eye doctor

In the 1980s, he became the personal ophthalmologist to Jiang Jing Quo, then-president of Taiwan and the only biological son of Chang Kai-sheck. â??I received a call from Dr. Paul Yu, a board-certified cardiologist from New York. Dr. Yu knew me because of my speaking tours in Taiwan, addressing diabetic retinopathy.â?• Yu told Fung, â??We want you to see a patient in Taiwanâ?¦ soon!â?•

â??This was my introduction to an eight-year chapter in my career,â?• Fung said. â??I made 35 round trips in eight years, performed five operations, and kept him seeing over the last eight years of his life.â?•

Since retiring, Fung occupies his time pruning roses in his Pacific Heights garden and other chores. He also takes classes at The Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning. Heâ??s improved his Zoom skills since Covid restrictions, but misses dining out with his wife, meeting with friends and colleagues.



Fung retired after a storied career as an ophthalmologist. (Photo by Myra Krieger.)

It was upon graduation from Vallejo High School in 1952 that Fung seriously embraced his motherâ??s prediction that he become a doctor. He entered the pre-med program at the University of California-Berkeley. While most such students went on to the University of California San Francisco, Fung applied and got into University of Southern California. Hearing there was a quota of one Chinese student per year at UCSF, he figured his chances were slim to none.

It wasnâ??t his first experience with barriers for Chinese. Fung was born in Oakland in 1934. â??Initially, my parents purchased a home close to downtown Oakland, perched on a hill, but they were met by rotten eggs and tomatoes thrown at our front door.â?• By the time he was three, they had moved to Vallejo.

Air Force duty inspires career choice

Fung served his medical internship at Santa Clara County Hospital in San Jose. But he was still trying to decide what area of medicine to focus on. â??Even after all this education, I still did not know what field I wanted for a specialty,â?• he said. â??I knew I wanted a surgical specialty, but which one? I liked them all.â?•

He took a second year in general surgery. Still undecided about a specialty, he joined the U.S. Air Force and completed a two-year position as flight surgeon at Kingsley Air Field in Klamath Falls, Ore.

The title is a bit of a misnomer, he said. He didnâ??t operate on board but was general physician for everyone on flight duty and their families. He got to fly four hours a month with a hefty hazardous pay supplement. The experience also steered him toward his eventual specialty.

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â??Being a flight surgeon, I was exposed to the physiology and anatomy of the eye in detail,â?• he said. â??I found it just so fascinating. There was so much to learn.â?•

So, he undertook a correspondence course offered by The American Academy of Ophthalmology and applied for a residency in ophthalmology at California Pacific.

Mentorship is important in most professions, and particularly in the progress of a resident in medicine, Fung said. He had a few, but one of the most principal was Dr. Gilbert W. Cleasby, an ophthalmologist with whom he opened the practice of Cleasby, Fung and Webster in 1968. Its offices were within the California Pacific Medical Center campus.

Fung went through a few evolutions in his private practice. It expanded to include 10 ophthalmologists, making it the largest private practice in ophthalmology in San Francisco up until he retired in 2013.

Fung knows he has a career that he can take pride in, but he hasnâ??t forgotten his humble beginnings.

His father was a part of a four-store family business who managed the â??Oakland Toggery.â?• It did well up to and during World War II, as Mare Island became a naval base. It thrived on sales of work clothes â?? all cotton nothing fancy â?? all cash and carry.

After being received by rotten eggs and tomatoes in Oakland, â??My Dad said, â??Okay, letâ??s move out a bit further.â?? â?• They bought a two-bedroom house on an alley across from an empty lot, which they also bought, and built a vegetable garden, a chicken house and a pigeon house.

Humble but hard-working family

â??My chores consisted of harvesting the eggs daily, feeding the chickens and pigeons, burying any dead animals (or rats) encountered during the process,â?• he said. â??As a lad, I soon learned the

hazards: When a hen wants to lay her eggs â?? watch out as you reach under her body to retrieve her eggs, she will whop with the leading edge of her wing â?? wear gloves!

â??Then when the 20-lb. rooster feels possessive of his flock, he will come directly at you, hop up and try to stab your leg with one of his three-inch spurs which project backwards from his claw. Wear rubber boots which come up to your knees!â?•

But the most grueling task for Fung was cleaning out the two-foot elevated roost bed once a month. â??Chickens are five times worse than pigeons,â?• he said.

Even though neither of his folks got more than an 8th grade education, Fung remembers his dad as a self-educated Chinese scholar type. â??We spoke San Francisco Bay Area English, Cantonese and almost no Mandarin â?? the northern Chinese ruling-class Chinese,â?• he said.

His relationship with his parents was ideal, he said, especially as he was the only male child in a Chinese family. So, he was proud in 1970, after his dad retired, to be able to purchase a condo for his parents in the Mandarin Towers on Stockton and Washington streets.

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Wayne Fung and his daughter, Anne. (Photos courtesy of Genentech.)

His own family life has also prospered. He met and married his wife, Helen, in his third year of medical school â?? 62 years ago. They have a daughter, Anne, who followed in her fatherâ??s footsteps to become an ophthalmologist specializing in vitreoretinal medicine. She works at Genentech, where she conducts research on age-related macro-degeneration.

He may be retired but Fung still has advice for anyone experiencing eye problems:

- If one is given the diagnosis of chronic open angle glaucoma: Take your drops or pills faithfully.
- If one is given the diagnosis of cataracts: Do not be talked into surgery. Only agree to surgery when and if the cataracts interfere with an activity want to do: drive, read, sew, string beads, etc.

- Seeing floaters (specks, lines or spots when looking at a blank surface) is common from age 35 to 45. They are usually benign. But if you see a shower of small dots or flashing lights off to the side, seek a retinal exam. These are caused by the gel-like material covering the back of the eyeball bunching together to form tiny strings or balls.
- If one has diabetes, Type I or Type II, have an annual eye examination beginning at age 12.

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