

ANACP Youth Columnist

Interview with Dr. Clark Tsai

By Alina Zhao



Early Life and Initial Interest in Medicine

Before becoming an ophthalmologist, Dr. Clark Tsai's journey into medicine was shaped by a challenging and complex early life in China during the Cultural Revolution. In high school, the political climate discouraged open discourse. Initially, Dr. Tsai didn't aspire to become a doctor, as he was unsure about the future of medical education in China, since colleges frequently being closed. Additionally, his parents were both clinical professors and had to work long hours. However, when colleges were starting to reopen, Dr. Tsai saw an opportunity. After graduating high school, he moved to the countryside and then attended college, excelling in science, mathematics, and physics. Despite his initial disinterest in medicine, influenced by his father's busy career, he pursued engineering in Beijing. The visit of President Nixon to China in 1972 inspired Dr. Tsai to apply to study in the US. With his father's encouragement, he reconsidered a career in medicine, finished his engineering degree, and applied for medical school.

Career Path: Internships, Residencies, and Fellowships

Dr. Tsai's career path after medical school involved adapting to American culture and norms, which were different from what he was accustomed to in China. He set clear goals for himself and relied on his tenacity to achieve them. "Set a couple goals for yourself, unless you die, you will carry out the task," he stated. His journey required self-reliance and determination to succeed in a new country.

Academic Challenges and Overcoming Them

Dr. Tsai faced significant challenges when he started medical school in 1984. Although his English was good among Chinese speakers, he found it insufficient for his studies in the US. The medical jargon and subjects he hadn't encountered before were difficult. Despite these obstacles, Dr. Tsai excelled, ranking in the top percent of his class by dedicating himself to his studies, even though it left little room for a balanced life, saying that studying was necessary and came with the decision of studying medicine.



The Joys and Challenges of Being a Doctor

One of the most rewarding aspects of Dr. Tsai's career is helping others, particularly in improving their vision. "Being able to help other people, make people see, and improve their vision," he says, brings him the most joy. However, the path was not without its challenges. Residency was tough, and he took an extra year for research, producing over 30 papers. Choosing his future career between an academic one and private practice was stressful, but he ultimately chose private practice and despite the initial difficulty of establishing himself, he now runs a successful one in California.

Interacting with Patients and Professional Advice Dr. Tsai emphasizes the importance of patient interaction, acknowledging that each patient is different and balancing time with each one is difficult, but crucial. I then asked him for advice regarding high school students considering a career in medicine, and Dr. Tsai advised to persevere. "Regroup yourself, don't give up, find a new path to get there," he says. He said it is easy to handle success, but often hard to learn how to deal with failure and grow from it. Mentorship and networking are also vital. Students should explore their interests and seek mentors who can provide resources down the line. Good grades are important, but passion and motivation are equally vital.



Future Goals and Reflections Looking ahead

Dr. Tsai is content with his practice but has a keen interest in exploring retina diseases.

Q: What makes an effective healthcare provider and leader?

A: He believes being an effective and compassionate healthcare provider requires social skills, honesty, and respect.

Q: What is some advice you would give to your younger self at the beginning of your medical career?

A: Reflecting on his career, he advises his younger self to ensure true intentions in pursuing medicine. "No matter why you want to go into medicine, make sure intentions are true," he emphasizes, noting that the field has evolved significantly over the years.

Dr. Tsai's journey is a testament to resilience, passion, and the importance of staying true to one's goals despite the challenges. His story is inspiring to those wanting to enter the medical field, highlighting the importance of determination, continuous learning, and compassionate care.



About the author: Alina Zhao

- Sophomore at Walter Payton College Prep, IL.
- Likes to play the violin, fence, and read.
- Interested in pursuing a career in medicine.