



"A happy and grateful patient, Day One following cataract surgery." Left: Dr Nisha Sachdev, Right: Miss Van Tran, Volunteer Optometrist from Melbourne Photo Courtesy of Jack Tran, Photojournalist

People Profile

Young Fellow - Nisha Sachdev

*Dr Nisha Sachdev
– comprehensive
ophthalmologist with a
sub-specialty interest in
paediatric ophthalmology*

In a career tussle between becoming a professional musician and studying medicine, medicine won the first round. Since Dr Nisha Sachdev finished her training and became a fully-qualified ophthalmologist almost three years ago, music and other creative pursuits have found their way back into her life.

"I started doing music lessons on the Electric Organ at age four and took part in my first Eisteddfod when I was five," says Nisha. Many Eisteddfods followed in the years Nisha and her family lived in Taree, on the mid north coast of NSW, resulting in a multitude of trophies. She also learnt the piano from age six.

"I am an Australian of Indian heritage. I was born in New Delhi and my parents migrated to Australia when I was two months old. I spent my formative years in Taree, a country town not far from the beach. It was a great place to grow up – I have fond memories of playing in the beach every afternoon after school, going to pool birthday parties and enjoying the

relaxed and friendly environment with all our neighbours."

Both Nisha's parents are doctors; her father is an Ophthalmologist and her mother an Obstetrician. "My parents decided to make the move to Sydney in 1986, so that my siblings and I didn't have to go to boarding school. The change was new and exciting for us kids, moving to the 'big city'!"

Music

When she moved to Sydney Nisha took up violin in the school orchestra and gained confidence with public performance during regular recitals throughout the school year.

"I was heavily involved in music all through school. I have a passion for music and studied music for the Higher School Certificate," says Nisha. "After high school I took a year off to decide whether a career in music was for me. During this gap year, I volunteered at the Conservatorium of Music in Sydney, as well as working as a sales assistant at Brashs Music store (now no longer in existence) and as a bank teller in ANZ city branch. During this year, I also completed Eighth Grade of the Australian Music Examinations Board."

“Since I loved science at school and wanted help people, I decided to do medicine. I knew that my passion for music would still be sustainable in the future as a hobby rather than a career.”

It was during this time, Nisha decided a career in music was not for her. "I realised I didn't quite have what it takes to break into the music scene. Since I loved science at school and wanted help people, I decided to do medicine. I knew that my passion for music would still be sustainable in the future as a hobby rather than a career."

Sydney University have now commenced a combined Bachelor of Music Studies and Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery Degree (BMus Studies/MBBS). "If only this was available in my time – this would have been perfect for me," says Nisha.

Medicine and ophthalmology

Having been brought up in a medical family, Nisha had been exposed to healthcare since she was a child. "The choice to do ophthalmology was a process of excluding other specialties at medical school. During my undergraduate medical and residency years, I knew I definitely wanted to be a surgeon of some description. I knew I definitely didn't want to be an orthopaedic surgeon (the instruments were too big!), or a neurosurgeon (I'm not that smart!)... During my undergraduate medical school training at the University of Dundee, Scotland, I decided to meet the heads of departments of each specialty. I was fortunate to meet Professor Charles McGhee. His demeanour, enthusiasm and his department were an inspiration to me."

Nisha did some part-time research with Prof McGhee during her final years of medical school (University of Dundee, Scotland) and it was during this time she decided a career in ophthalmology was for her. Following her internship, she did a PhD in Ophthalmology and Visual Science at the University of Auckland (under supervision of Professor McGhee and Dr Trevor Sherwin).

"As hard as this was, it was very rewarding. Under directorship of Prof McGhee [now in New Zealand], the motto 'work hard, play hard' comes to mind. I was also a senior lecturer with the University of Auckland which was an amazing experience and solidified the role of academia in ophthalmology."

During her training, Nisha particularly enjoyed the sub-specialties of paediatrics and strabismus, and decided to do a fellowship in Paediatrics and Strabismus at The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne.

Nisha moved from Melbourne to Sydney a few months ago. "Since my

family are in Sydney and I don't see much of them, I decided to relocate back to Sydney. It was a hard decision to make, since my career was going so well in Melbourne. However, family are family, and I must say, it's very nice being home."

“During Nisha's training she was the Qualification and Education Committee representative for all NZ trainees for two years.”

Nisha is currently exploring different avenues to pursue being back in Sydney. She hopes to work in some public hospitals to continue her career in Paediatric Ophthalmology and to be active in training and teaching registrars. "I would hope to be an examiner for the College exams one day too. This keeps you up-to-date with the latest techniques and treatments in Ophthalmology".

College roles

During Nisha's training she was the Qualification and Education Committee representative for all NZ trainees for two years. The role included representing NZ trainees at a College level and discussing issues relevant to registrar training. In addition to this, this role involved organising registrar conferences in NZ.

After moving to Melbourne from NZ, Nisha remained involved in coordinating seminars and tutorials for trainees. She was also involved in running a paediatric ophthalmology seminar at The Children's Hospital. Nisha is a member of RANZCO's Paediatric Special Interest Group and is also a reviewer of the College



Ophthalmic Surgeons operating in Lam Dong Hospital. From far: Dr Nisha Sachdev, Dr Trevor Gin, Dr Andrew Narita, Dr Kevin Foo" (All RANZCO Fellows from Melbourne) Photo Courtesy: Andrew Tran, Volunteer Pharmacist, Sydney

journal, Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology.

Leading up to RANZCO's Annual Scientific Congress in 2012, Nisha served on the Congress Committee as a representative for Younger Fellows. "The role was basically to ensure there were specific activities for younger fellows during the Congress," says Nisha. "This involved organising a formal younger fellows dinner, which was a good avenue for us to catch up with each other."

Nisha has been recently appointed as part of a Younger Fellows Advisory Group with younger fellow representatives from each State part of the group. "This group meets every few months to discuss younger fellow issues within RANZCO. In addition we will be organising specific RANZCO events throughout the year targeted at younger fellows," she says.

Nisha is on the Board of Directors of the Independent Ophthalmic Network (ION) and during the Congress 2012 she organised business skills' sessions – coordinated with ION – to provide education and skills for young ophthalmologists in the business arena. "This is an area that is not addressed in our training," says Nisha. "You don't really get taught

how to run a practice, how to pay staff, how to do BAS and tax and audits. We had senior Fellows talk about what they would have done differently in their experience, and we had practice managers speaking on how to run a practice efficiently. We also had a lawyer talk to us about asset control and management and the different ways of financially managing a practice – all useful things for all fellows, including younger Fellows particularly."

Aid work in Vietnam

When Nisha was based in Melbourne, the practice she was working in was located within a predominantly Vietnamese community. Some of the staff spoke about their experiences working on eye-care trips with the Vietnam Vision Project (VVP), and Nisha volunteered for her first trip to Vietnam in 2012.

"The VVP has been going once each year for 11 years now. Each annual trip runs for two weeks, split between two hospitals in rural parts of Vietnam. Local Vietnamese groups coordinate with local temples in the Buddhist community, to organise bus transport for poor people to come and have eye surgery."

It's a finely-tuned process. There's a team of 40 people, including five RANZCO ophthalmologists, five ophthalmic nurses, with the rest of the team comprised of optometrists, orthoptists, GPs, anaesthetists, non-medical staff and translators. In addition to this, there is a VVP dental team, comprised of dentists, dental assistants, non-medical staff and translators.

“This year we did 730 cataract operations and we saw 850 patients for vision screening”

"During these trips to Vietnam, we work with the ophthalmic team from the Saigon Eye Hospital. Their surgeons, nurses and anaesthetists work with us; there are four of their surgeons and four of our surgeons all operating, so we have eight operating tables running at once!" says Nisha.

Nisha returned in early August from her second trip to Vietnam. "We had five operating days, predominantly cataract surgery, and this year we did 730 cataract operations and we saw 850 patients for vision

screening. The dental team had an amazing result too, performing 1200 dental procedures including teeth extractions and fillings. This is an accolade to the organisers of such a brilliant organisation.”

Creative pursuits and sailing

Nisha’s passion is music. “While I had to put music on the backburner throughout my ophthalmology training, I’m now at the stage in my career where I can revisit my passion.”

Two years ago, while Nisha was living and working in Melbourne, she also took some photography courses. “I loved experimenting with different lenses and getting into digital photography. I joined a photography group, where we used to go on photography walks, and I particularly loved Melbourne’s graffiti walls up all the narrow laneways and the old historic buildings in Melbourne. In joining this group, I’ve started to see the gratification photography can provide; the ability to express emotion through a photograph is similar to the emotional expression one makes through music.”

Nisha is about to reconnect with another favourite pursuit she used to do during her training in NZ. “I did a sailing course in Auckland (which was a nice break from my PhD studies) and took up open ocean sailing. I was part of a sailing crew in Auckland and Wellington, and I’m about to join the Rose Bay Sailing Club and get back to being part of a crew. Being on the water provides such serenity. It’s as if you’re completely away from everything.”

“Mum and Dad used to work in volunteer eye camps and work in orphanages in India. Both of my parents were always involved in charity work all their lives.”

Future endeavours

Nisha’s involvement with the Vietnam Vision Project has sparked a desire to establish similar programs in India in the future. “I can speak the language and I can understand the cultural side of things, and I now have some skills to be of benefit to others. I’d love to give back to the country of our origin. There’s a lot of scope for eye work in India; the need there is phenomenal.”

Nisha credits her parents for instilling the desire to do some volunteer work in places like Vietnam and India. “My parents were a good influence as we were growing up. Mum and Dad used to work in volunteer eye camps and work in orphanages in India. Both of my parents were always involved in charity work all their lives. We used to go back and visit and donate to the blind colonies in India. They have always taught us we’re fortunate, and to be grateful for what we have – and to give back.”



“Vietnam Vision Project (VVP) Volunteers 2013. Outside Lam Dong Hospital. All Ophthalmic and Dental Team Volunteers”. Photo Courtesy Jack Tran Photojournalist