



# Standard bearer

PROFESSOR LAI-MENG LOOI HAS SQUEEZED MYRIAD ACHIEVEMENTS INTO HER NOTABLE PATHOLOGY CAREER. REBECCA GREATREX REPORTS.

Professor Lai-Meng Looi can't remember a time when she didn't want to be a doctor.

And after a 50-year career that has transformed pathology in Malaysia and seen her named a Companion of the Crown by the King, this consultant anatomical pathologist has never lost her original focus – describing a pathologist as “first and foremost a medical doctor”.

The fourth of six children, Professor Looi, who holds the Chair of Pathology at the University of Malaya's Faculty of Medicine, grew up in Bentong, a small town surrounded by jungle.

It was the sort of place that “people would go by, on their way to other big cities”, but it had a small hospital where her father worked as a hospital assistant and she would visit him there.

“He was always very busy, but very patient, and people related to him,” she says.

“I guess I got used to the hospital and clinical environment.”

Forced to move to Kuala Lumpur at the tender age of 16 to continue her education, Professor Looi describes it as “an adventure in a sense, but not too unusual because my elder siblings did the same thing”.

She rented a room and enjoyed the freedom to make her own decisions.

“It was quite nice to be away from home!”

She gained a Malaysian Federal Scholarship to study medicine at the University of Singapore, where she discovered her love for microscopy and

enjoyed “drawing the cells and structures I saw down the microscope”.

Her artistic talents expanded beyond histology, though.

“I enjoyed sketching people and landscapes, and abstract things like designing posters with psychedelic colours.”

Her creativity also extended to poetry, writing and drama.

While thoroughly enjoying her five years in Singapore, it was there, in her fourth year, that she decided on pathology as “the subject that made the most sense”.

It appealed because “it explained how disease occurs and affects the body, the signs and symptoms that patients develop and gave the logical basis for treatment”.

Professor Looi describes her years at Singapore as a good experience, not only because of the quality of teaching, but because the students were given the freedom to do things their own way.

“It was entirely up to you,” she says, “and I liked that because it allowed you to learn at your own pace.”

## *Buckets of calm*

Aileen Wee, Professor of Pathology at the National University of Singapore, has known Professor Looi since they were fellow students and describes her not only as smart, but as one of the “calmest, most unruffled persons I have met. Nothing can fluster her.”

These qualities stood the professor in good stead when she returned to Kuala

Lumpur as a houseman at the General Hospital – “the busiest and largest hospital in Malaysia” – which was short of doctors.

“Suddenly you have to take care of the ward and you're only a houseman,” she says.

Daily ‘bucket duty’ involved carrying a pail full of surgical resections from the operating theatre to the pathology department, where she got to know all the pathologists and would linger around.

At the end of the year, she was offered chances to train in surgery and paediatrics, but not in pathology: “Nobody was very interested in pathology at that time.”

But as pathology remained her main interest, she investigated the MPath program at the University Hospital, where she was advised to acquire another year of clinical experience.

After another year at the General Hospital she enrolled in the two-year MPath. The department had strong links with the Royal College of Pathologists in the UK, which enabled her to receive solid training from visiting members of the college. By 1982 she held both the MPath and the MRCPPath qualifications and had developed a serious interest in research – in particular, amyloidosis.

Its occurrence in the Malaysian population became the subject of her doctoral research. Other research areas included tactoidal proteins, renal pathophysiology and cancer progression and have resulted in more than 200 publications.



“Once I even cleaned the windows  
and the toilets so the cleaners could  
not make lame excuses”



# CV in brief

## PROFESSOR LAI-MENG LOOI

1975	MBBS
1980	MPath
1982	MRCPath (Member, Royal College of Pathologists)
1984–99	Head, Department of Pathology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya
1985	MIAC (International Academy of Cytology)
	FRCPA (Fellow, Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia)
1986–	Professor (Chair), Department of Pathology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya
1986–	Senior Consultant Histopathologist, University Hospital, Kuala Lumpur
1987	MD (Doctorate in Medicine)
1993	FRCPath (Fellow, Royal College of Pathologists)
1993–	President, College of Pathologists, Academy of Medicine Malaysia
1997	FAMM (Fellow, Academy of Medicine of Malaysia)
1999	Malaysian National Scientist
1999–2003	Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Programmes), Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya
1999–2007	Regional Councillor (Malaysia), RCPA
2000	JSM (Johan Setia Mahkota) – Companion of the Crown
2001	ASEAN Outstanding Scientist & Technologist Award ASEAN-COST
2003	Rotary Research Foundation Gold Medalist
2004–2006	National Representative (Malaysia), Royal College of Pathologists
2005	FAMS (Fellow, Academy of Medicine Singapore)
2005	Honorary Fellow, College of Pathologists of South Africa
2005	FASc (Senior Fellow, Academy of Sciences, Malaysia)
2007	President, 24th World Congress of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine
2007–	Director-at-Large, Bureau of the World Association of Societies of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine

Professor Looi describes her research skills as “mainly in diagnostic pathology; very patient-focused, to establish what kind of treatment is suitable for the patient”.

### *Scrubbing in*

It is this aspect of her job that she considers the most important and, in order to avoid losing touch, she is still rostered onto regular surgical pathology and autopsy duty like the other anatomical pathologists in the department.

“We have a trainee with us and take the trainee from very basic pathology right up to very difficult cases. It works out very well. I don’t regret that I have to look at an appendix or something else very straightforward.”

She had just settled into her doctoral research when her mentor, Professor Prathap, died unexpectedly, leaving a huge vacuum in the pathology department as most of the senior staff had emigrated to Australia, and “the rest of us were very green”.

Nevertheless, she was made Head of Department shortly afterwards and suddenly found herself having to cope with a triple workload of research, teaching and administration.

It was a hard time and Professor Looi became used to doing quite a bit outside office hours.

She found that she enjoyed those times, with no phone calls and interruptions, and so this was when she focused most on her research.

“I certainly worked quite a lot at the weekends,” she says. “I spent a lot of time in the department and it was more or less my second home.”

Today, though, she tries to protect her weekends, and spend a bit more time with her family.

An old teacher once advised her to try everything at least once before asking someone else to do it.

Consequently, she tried to perform the work herself before delegating it.

“It is also harder for others to pull the wool over your eyes if you have done the job before. Once I even cleaned the windows and the toilets so that the cleaners could not make lame excuses.”



*Playing the guitar was a youthful pursuit;  
Left: sitting atop the family's first car.*

Dr Leslie Lai, Consultant in Chemical Pathology and Metabolic Medicine at the Sunway Medical Centre in Malaysia, has known Professor Looi for about 10 years and comments on her fun-loving nature.

“She is a very likeable person who always brings a bit of fun and laughter into everything.” This may help explain why Professor Looi has been awarded ‘Best Lecturer’ seven times by her students.

Even as a child, she would enjoy teaching her younger siblings and helping her mother, who taught English in a Chinese school.

“I like to share ideas and explain things and I enjoy taking tutorials,” she says.

## *Raising the bar*

Under Professor Looi’s leadership, the Pathology Department at the University Hospital has become the most reputable in Malaysia – partly because she encouraged the staff to do their doctorates and to sit their fellowship exams, and partly because she upgraded the MPath course to match the standard

set by both the Royal Colleges in the UK and Australasia.

She was also instrumental in creating a training program for Sudanese specialists that she feels has internationalised the department.

Another long-term colleague, Soon-Keng Cheong, Professor of Haematology at the International Medical University in Malaysia, describes her as “capable, independent and forward-looking” and admires her ability to rally people round an objective.

One such objective, achieved in 1999, was to unite Malaysian pathologists under one professional body- The College of Pathologists, Academy of Medicine Malaysia.

Professor Looi organised help from the British Council “when we were quite short of expertise” and strengthened links with other overseas colleges, including the RCPA. She served as the RCPA Malaysian Councillor until recently and also worked to get the pathology department accredited as a training centre towards the FRCPA.

And after four years of effort, the introduction of a national accreditation scheme for medical testing laboratories in

Malaysia is another string she can add to her bow.

Professor Looi oversaw the introduction of immunohistochemical and molecular techniques into diagnostic pathology across Malaysia, and has seen pathology become more widely recognised by the public, describing the current climate as a “great time for pathology”.

This increased public profile contributed to the regulation of pathology laboratories through the Pathology Bill, which had languished for two decades until it was passed this year. Professor Looi describes this as a big achievement.

Eventually she plans to retire completely from pathology to write books and spend more time on a less vigorous pursuit: fishing.

“It’s nothing very grand. I just take a rod and a worm and go down to the river,” she says. “Some of the fish are respectable enough to cook for dinner, but it doesn’t matter whether I catch anything, I just enjoy the quiet time.”

She is quietly modest about her achievements, too, saying only, “I did what I could!”. 🍷