



PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

# True calling

SK Tan, 'grandfather of aesthetics', continues his entrepreneurial success story by venturing into skincare products and clinical research, while pursuing his philanthropic passion

By GENEVIEVE CUA

**W**ITHIN the medical profession, aesthetics is big business, tapping into Asia's rising affluence and individuals' perennial desire to look good. Here though is an aesthetics specialist who expanded far beyond his medical practice, becoming a successful entrepreneur and venture capitalist to boot.

SK Tan, dubbed in local circles as the "grandfather of aesthetics", is best known as founder and medical director of Derma-RX and The DRx Clinic on Orchard Rd. When it was established in 1998, it was one of the first to focus purely on aesthetic treatments, a move that his friends cautioned him against. "I found there was a need among people who wanted aesthetics treatments – for pigmentation, wrinkles, lines, younger people with acne. I took a very brave step. I started to do pure aesthetics in 1998.

"All my dermatologist friends said – 'siao (crazy), you can't survive'. 'You must do dermatology at the same time.' Within a couple of years after I went in, everyone wanted to do the same thing."

He sold the DRx practice in 2010 to the India-based Kaya for an undisclosed eight-figure sum, an amount that astonished those in the know. The clinic has since changed hands and is now owned by a private equity firm KV Asia Capital.

Dr Tan has not sat still. When his management contract with DRx ran its course, he set up his own clinic, IDS (Innovative Dermatological Solutions) in 2014. The clinic at the Novena Specialist Centre, he says, turned a profit within a year. But even that, he says, is not the most promising of his investments in terms of potential returns. That lies in his pharmaceuticals investment in Israel, for which he and his wife Janifer Yeo-Tan expect to be offered a staggering nine-figure sum. But first, some background.

As a youth, Dr Tan did not think too deeply about his choice of medicine as a profession. "In my time, it was a matter of progression. If you did well in school, you chose either mathematics or life sciences. I hated maths, so I went into life sci-

ences. I don't think I ever had the burning ambition to be a doctor. But once I went into it, it was like a duck taking to water."

He graduated in 1971 with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery from the University of Malaya. He picked up a number of postgraduate qualifications – in dermatology, cosmetic science and even a Master of Business Administration.

He began to practice medicine in Singapore in 1983 at a family practice, called the Island Group Clinic. Within a year, he borrowed money to buy the practice. He sold it prior to starting DRx.

He credits his wife with being the brains behind their businesses. "She's my boss. She runs everything. I do the easy part. I sit in the clinic," he says to his wife's protests. "She looks at the business aspects and the aesthetic, creative parts. I do the hard-core science. We complement each other."

Ms Yeo-Tan herself has entrepreneurial chops. She began working with Dr Tan, tapping him to test a line of skincare products that she was marketing in the 1990s. She ended up joining DRx, eventually becoming a director. Today, in addition to their joint business efforts and investments, she also runs a food and beverage group in Kuala Lumpur, called Troika Sky Dining. Troika comprises a tapas restaurant called fuego; the Claret wine bar; Strato for Italian fare; and there is Cantaloupe for fine dining.

## Business concept

Dr Tan says DRx's business concept, which is partly replicated in IDS, was thanks to Ms Yeo-Tan's brainwave. She says: "When I went in, we changed the concept quite a bit. I thought – how much time can (Dr Tan) have? Consultation takes up time. So we came up with the idea of having therapists instead of nurses.

"We recruited a group of therapists. We may have been the first to do that. The doctor does the prescription and the therapist walks the patient through the procedure and how to use the product."

Product development was – and continues to be – a source of innovation. While DRx always had its own line of skincare products, IDS has taken it a step further. Instead of subcontracting production to a third party, it is currently in

negotiations to purchase the plant that it uses in the US to manufacture its products. This enables it to control both upstream and downstream processes.

The couple intend to take the IDS skincare line, developed under a company called JYSK Skin Solutions, international. Dr Tan has partnered Dr Jacob Waugh, co-founder of US-listed Revance Technologies, to set up a laboratory called Illustris Pharmaceuticals. California-based Illustris conducts research in three areas – cosmetology, pharmaceuticals and diagnostics.

In cosmetology, the group has secured a patent for a technology that facilitates the delivery of ingredients to the human skin. It calls this "transcutaneous delivery system" Enhance, which will feature in a number of IDS's products.

Says Dr Tan: "We have patents which are approved and we will incorporate these into our products, which makes a world of difference. To put it simply there are lots of products and ingredients that are proven to work in a laboratory. Ingredient A may be shown to stimulate collagen in the cells in a lab. But when you apply it to the skin it is not absorbed. It will not have the effect you see in the lab."

He adds: "We intend to license the technology to big multinationals. We have been approached already."

IDS is now gearing up to take its skincare line to the global market. Ms Yeo-Tan says: "When we started IDS in 2014 we were happy just to use the line ourselves. But the technology evolved, Jacob came in and we had our patents. We relocated the business and thought it didn't do justice to the technology we have. So we're now rebranding, changing our packaging and relocating our marketing." A roadshow is planned for November. An office has also been set up in Hong Kong to take care of the Greater China market.

Another venture is a clinical research organisation – the Lyons, France-based Institut d'Expertise Clinique – which performs safety and efficacy tests of products for dermatological and ophthalmologic use. The operation in Singapore is a joint venture with the French Guillot family. It provides "good, steady" income, he says.

There is also Israel-based Implite Ltd, which has developed breast implants described as "ultra-light" and gel-free.

**'I will not retire. As long as the brain works, it's fine. Work is my passion.'**



**WARMING HEARTS**

Feeding children in the Philippines. Through the JYSK Foundation, the couple also help to support the care of more than 400 children



PHOTOS: JYSK GROUP

But the biggest venture by far is an investment in pharmaceuticals research company Novaremed, based in Israel. The couple are directors in the company. Novaremed is developing a compound for neuropathic pain, which according to the website, has demonstrated “a significantly higher efficacy and better safety profile than the existing medications”. Neuropathic pain may be caused by cancer, diabetes or nerve trauma, among others.

The firm has completed phase IIA of testing on human subjects and is proceeding to IIB. Dr Tan says: “Returns from this investment are likely to be very high. We have passed IIA testing which is proof of efficacy. Phase IIB is more rigorous, after which one of the big boys will offer to buy us out.”

Ms Yeo-Tan says: “If we sell now, we’re looking at a sum of nine figures. If we sell a few more months down the line, we’re looking at an even higher nine-figure number.” The compound is said to be unique as it is effective with no side effects.

With all that is on their plates, the couple are grounded in their philanthropic work and Christian faith. “Being wealthy means we have enough for ourselves and more to give to others,” says Dr Tan. They attribute the opportunities that they’ve had to divine providence. Ms Yeo-Tan says: “Truly it’s His perfect timing. He opened doors and sent partners. We flow with it.”

Their philanthropic passion is children. They themselves have two children, a daughter from Dr Tan’s first marriage who is in her 30s, and a three-year-old named Kyla whom they adopted as a baby. They also have 11 godchildren whom they support “in every way we can – financial, schooling”, says Ms Yeo-Tan. The children are generally from poor, dysfunctional families.

The eldest of the godchildren is 31, and working as a doctor. The youngest is a teenager. Two godchildren live with them in their bungalow at King Albert Park.

Before they adopted Kyla they were foster parents to a baby boy. Says Ms Yeo-Tan: “I was on board a charity and we used to care for the abused, abandoned or neglected children. For two years we cared for a boy. It’s very good work. We invested in a child’s life. When he first came he was nearly six months... When he left he was two and a half (years old), and we cried for two months. We still miss him.” Kyla, she says, is God’s gift to them.

Through the JYSK Foundation, the couple also help to support the care of more than 400 children – some through the Christian humanitarian group World Vision, which they have supported for 15 years, and some through Christian missions in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Mozambique in Africa.

Dr Tan sold DRx as part of estate planning. Now, however, it appears that he is busier than ever. Ms Yeo-Tan says: “DRx was like our baby, I didn’t want to sell. But I knew where he was coming from. He worried that I’d be left with nothing if something happened to him.”

Dr Tan says: “I’m much older than Jan.” He is 69 and she is 51. “Medical practices don’t do well when the key person isn’t around. We were riding high with DRx. If we could get a good price, we’d have security, a nest egg and we could always start again... In hindsight it was a good move.”

Dr Tan is looking into “a very structured succession plan” for the IDS clinic. “We have two doctors now, and we’re probably taking in a third one soon, so I can devote my energies to developing new and better products.”

At the moment he works between three and four days a week. “Most of my work is on the products and in the clinic. We will also probably spend more time with the charities we’re involved in. Basically we have a calling from God.”

Banish the thought of retirement, he says. “I will not retire. As long as the brain works, it’s fine. Work is my passion.”

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