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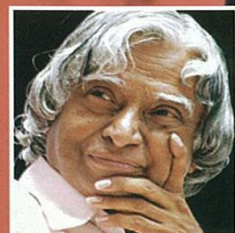
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ENHANCEMENT OF WOMEN'S HEALTHCARE

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HEALTHCARE

PRIMANORA

Over the past two and a half decades, her expertise has been sought by government bodies such as the Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development and the National Population & Family Development Board; and organizations like the Malaysia Cervical Cancer Prevention Advisory Board and Terengganu Family Development Foundation.

Growing up in Singapore, Nor Ashikin Mokhtar's life was filled with making hard decisions. Straitened family finances meant that five cents spent on sweets translated into no bus fare and a long walk home. But the early years toughened her, gave her an unshakeable sense of her vocation, and created the deep empathy she has for the people she has devoted herself to helping.

"I always wanted to be a doctor," says Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar, who has taken this passion for medicine one step further with the establishment of the PrimaNora Medical Centre, a place dedicated to women's wellness.

Stellar qualifications

Her vocation for medicine saw her qualifying from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) with a distinction in Obstetrics & Gynaecology in 1984, then going on to attachments at the General Hospitals of Malacca and Kuala Lumpur, and the Leicester Royal Infirmary in the UK. After a lecturer's stint at the training hospital of her alma mater, HUKM, she went into private practice at the Pantai Medical Centre in 1992, where she was the associate partner of its founder, the late Dr Yeo Oon Hock.

In the course of her career at Pantai Medical Centre, she estimates that she has managed the health of at least 10,000 women, and delivered about 3,000 babies (including five of her own!), so when she talks about women's health, it pays to listen.

Over the past two and a half decades, her expertise has been sought by government bodies such as the Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development and the National Population & Family Development Board; and organizations like the Malaysia Cervical Cancer Prevention Advisory Board and Terengganu Family Development Foundation. She is also on numerous committees of medical societies but still finds time to be a health consultant and advisor to magazines and newspapers.

By the time Dr Nor Ashikin decided to strike out on her own, she had already reached the top, professionally speaking, and had both the private and public sector accolades to prove it, including numerous awards by magazines for her success in the medical field, and a datukship conferred by the Yang Di Pertuan Agong.



Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar

No resting on laurels

Where other women would have perhaps called it a day and settled down to enjoy the fruits of success, she decided instead that the time was ripe to pursue another part of her dream: to establish a community and outpatient-based outreach centre primarily for the maintenance of women's wellness. Thus did the good doctor's philosophy concretise, in late 2007, into the PrimaNora Medical Centre.

At PrimaNora, the approach to health and medicine is a holistic one. "It's not so much the treatment of ailments, but the maintenance of wellness that we are aiming for," Dr Nor Ashikin explains. "Very often, it's 'family first' for women. They tend to put themselves last when it comes to taking care of their health; but from experience, we know that a healthy woman means a healthy family."

The setting up of a wellness centre the size and scope of PrimaNora was enough to daunt even the hardest of developers, but Dr Nor Ashikin proved her mettle, putting together a multidisciplinary team of 30 specialists from different establishments while sourcing for a suitable building, liaising with contractors, overseeing design, construction and renovation, and generally project-managing the entire operation.

Wide range of facilities available

The hours were long, and there were many frustrations before her plans could come to fruition but she persevered. Was she worried that in an extremely middle-class area with excellent health facilities already existing, her venture would have a hard time, customer-wise? On the contrary.

"Many of my patients knew me from my Pantai (Medical Centre) days, so they followed me here," she says. "Their support has been gratifying, and I am so happy that I can offer them the kind of consultancy, in an aesthetically-pleasing environment, with the right kind of diagnostic tools and supportive personnel, that I have always dreamt of being able to do."

She emphasizes that PrimaNora is not a clinic, although it certainly has the appropriately-qualified personnel to classify it as such. "Women – and men as well – who come here seeking treatment are diagnosed and referred to hospital if necessary. We have high-end equipment and highly-qualified personnel but our aim is to help people manage their health, rather than treat illnesses."

The Centre has specialist clinics for Obstetrics, Gynaecology, Breast Cancer, Cardiology, Endocrinology, Geriatric Medicine, Medical Aesthetics, Neurology, Orthopaedics, Paediatrics and Rheumatology among others. It also has sophisticated equipment to measure bone density and body mass, and for laser removal of skin pigmentation and scars, besides the facilities for ECG and stress tests, lung function test, mammograms and breast biopsy.

A fully-equipped laboratory makes for faster test results, and a pharmacy dispenses medication, making it more convenient for patients, and lessening waiting time. The Centre's pleasant environment and staff too, go a long way in lessening the anxiety of being in the doctor's waiting room.

The price of keeping well

The lounge and waiting areas have a distinctly un-clinical feel to them. Modern artwork adorns the walls, and consultation suites are tastefully wallpapered. Some parts of the Medical Centre could easily be mistaken for corporate offices. Only the sleek medical equipment standing discreetly by a comfortable couch gives it away.

Security and privacy are major concerns. Dr Nor Ashikin's team puts in a lot of effort to ensure that patients feel at ease and confident with their treatment. Her high standards and reputation have also attracted a number of celebrities and foreign patients.



Having traveled widely, she has been able to see firsthand the elements that work and those to avoid, when establishing a community-based wellness management centre such as she intends PrimaNora to be. But while PrimaNora has been carefully thought out, designed and executed, some questions beg to be asked: at what price does such sophistication come, and what can a patient expect to pay for facilities like these?

"My intention is to provide affordable, quality health and wellness care for women," clarifies Dr Nor Ashikin, "and I have been very fortunate that through the grace of God, I have been allowed to do this – provide a wide range of services, literally from the womb to the tomb, in one location. I feel that what we offer is affordable for everyone. It's not about the money; it's the gratification of knowing that we've made someone's life a little better."

Setting standards

Now that the PrimaNora Medical Centre is up and running, and she and her team can use it to achieve their objective of enhancing women's wellness, what area will she be expanding into next? The indefatigable doctor smiles merrily and drops hints about a women's hospital.

"No, no, not right now, of course!" she laughs. "But it's definitely something that I shall consider for the future. There isn't a hospital exclusively for women in Malaysia, so that will be a first too. I think the best thing that can come of these ventures is that women start health screening at an earlier age, which will help them attain a better quality of life. My personal philosophy is that God made you, and you are therefore important. Women owe it to themselves to strive for good health – because they are important." ❖

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