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MD vs Mum

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EXCLUSIVE WITH LIFE
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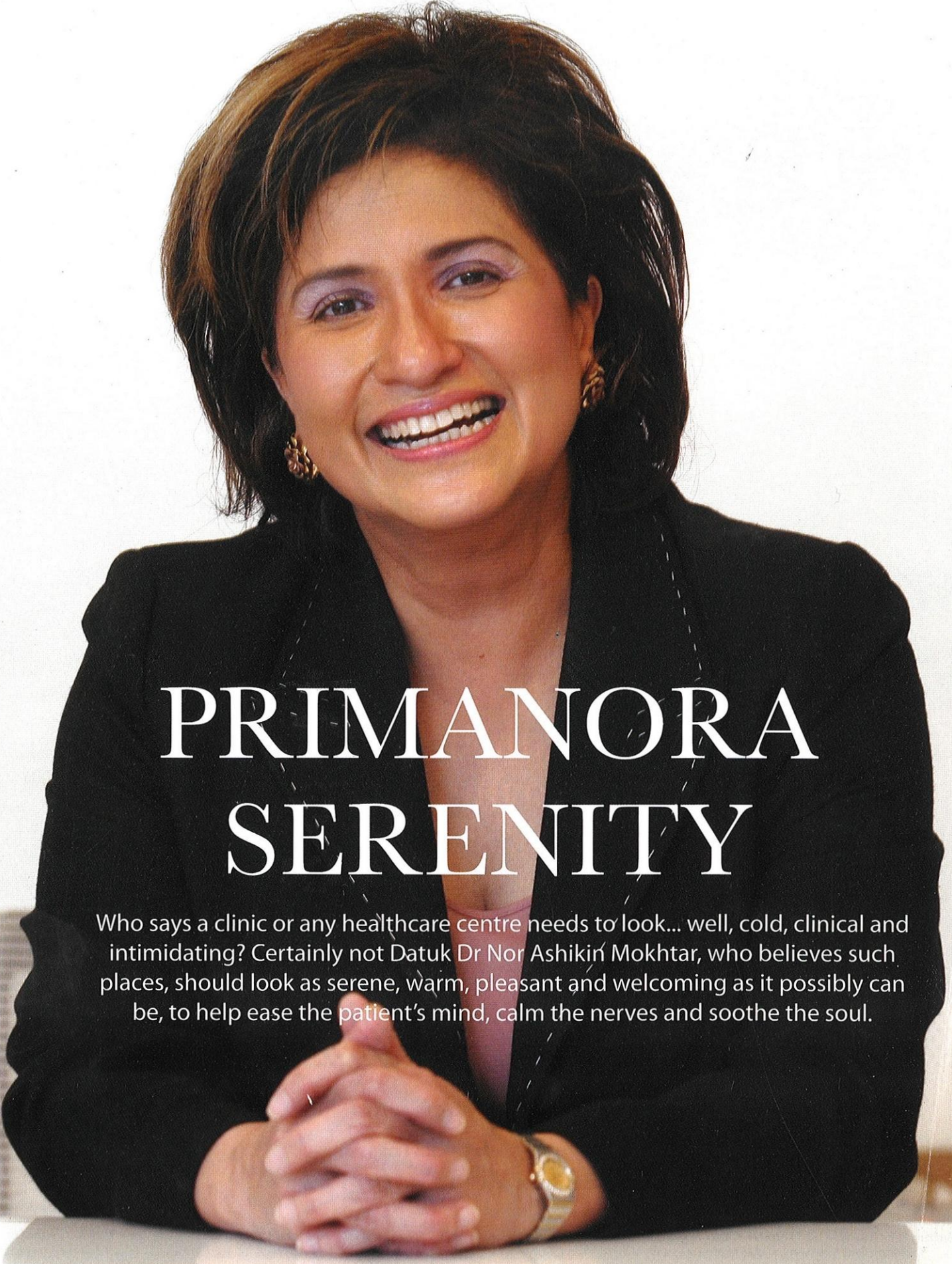
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profile

Text by **Caroline Yap**
Photos by **Ham Abu Bakar**

A portrait of Dr. Nor Ashikin Mokhtar, a woman with dark, wavy hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a black blazer over a pink top and large gold hoop earrings. Her hands are clasped together on a surface in front of her. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

PRIMANORA SERENITY

Who says a clinic or any healthcare centre needs to look... well, cold, clinical and intimidating? Certainly not Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar, who believes such places, should look as serene, warm, pleasant and welcoming as it possibly can be, to help ease the patient's mind, calm the nerves and soothe the soul.

“ You can
be great in
anything
as long as
you are
passionate.
I love what
I do.”





There's a little bit of a hypochondriac in all of us. If our bodies don't feel right, we immediately worry that it's indicative of something bigger. Some of us get caught up in our imagined conditions, signing up for a slew of tests and medical check ups. Some of us take the worry and hide it in the furthest reaches of our minds – taking the attitude that what we don't know won't hurt us.

Whichever camp we fall into, there's no denying that health is a worrisome issue. An issue made worse by the images it brings to mind – sterile clinical settings, sick people in a hospital, intimidating white coats and cold probes. It's perfectly dreary as well. Grey linoleum with dull rows of chairs. Pale faces waiting for loved ones, sirens blaring in the background.

It's no wonder that many have an ingrained fear of medical institutions. The uneasy aura of fear and anxiety eats away your confidence that you can still take on the world with one hand in your pocket.

Now, imagine walking into a clinic that looks like a spa – a place that welcomes you with comfy cosy sofas, pretty wallpaper and plenty of flowers.

It's a total paradigm shift but it's one that Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar has adopted as her mission. And she has taken the first steps early this year, with the opening of Primanora, a women's wellness centre.

Primanora has been designed to specifically cater not just for the medical needs of women, but also to provide a place where women can feel at peace, leaving stress and anxiety behind.

"It also provides the convenience of a one-stop centre in a community-based set up. You don't have to go to a hospital unless you have to," Dr Nor Ashikin explains.

"Health screening here is not intimidating. Medical institutions don't have to be serious or boring," she says as we sit in one of her consultation rooms where two fiery red bucket chairs line one wall and a sofa lines another.

The rest of the centre is also tastefully decorated with pretty wallpaper, flowers, lounge chairs and the like. It is a place you can imagine sitting and sharing gossip with a friend over a hot cup of tea. And in fact, it's what Dr Nor Ashikin finds herself doing sometimes with her patients. "There are times when they just want someone to talk to," she says. "I end up playing all roles – doctor, mother, sister, counsellor." It's because her patients know that what they tell her stays in strictest doctor-patient confidence, whether it's medical-based or just issues of life and love.

Having had 16 years of experience as a gynaecologist at Pantai Medical Centre in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, Dr Nor Ashikin says that her passion has always been women's health and how to make it accessible to women, not just in location but in appeal. These are things she feels she has a good grasp on because, "As a woman and as a gynaecologist, I know my women better."

The physicians in Primanora come from different specialities giving them the ability to ensure that women are seen by the right doctors. The fact that they are all under one roof also means that you are not subjected to tramping from one end of a building to another, across long corridors to attend to different tests.

"A woman's time is precious and it's convenient for her to have access to all the services in one place," she explains.

However, Dr Nor Ashikin stresses that the centre provides only outpatient care. "If they need further treatment, we refer them to hospitals," she explains.

Although her dream is to one day grow Primanora into a full-fledged hospital, she does not have the facilities to do so currently. "And I always believe that near enough is not good enough. If someone needs hospitalisation it has to be in a hospital set-up."

Bringing everything together for the start of Primanora was challenging and running it continues to be so for Dr Nor Ashikin. But challenges are not alien to her. She has always had the spirit to meet whatever life puts in front of her with vigour and a positive energy.

Having married while still studying, she and her husband who was also enrolled in the medical faculty at UKM, soon found themselves expecting a baby.

"I was determined to take care of my child. I didn't ask for one sen more from my parents," she says. So it was that she was just in her early 20s when she juggled studies, husband and baby. "We saved money being married because we shared textbooks and travel expenses," she says with a laugh.

When the baby arrived, she and her husband sent the baby to a sitter and once classes were finished for the day, they would bring the baby back to the campus. "All our friends at the dorm loved to help us look after the baby!" she says.

It was this period that taught Dr Nor Ashikin valuable time management skills that she has kept with her all her life.

Of course, she recalls being slagged off for tying herself

own with a family even before finishing her studies: "People say career first, but I say why not have both?" And she did.

Despite the many distractions, she passed her exams with distinction and became one of the few female gynaecologists in the country at the time. "When I graduated, there were only three women gynaes."

Although one can imagine the struggle she would have been through, she has no regrets. "I feel like I had a head start in life living both my career and my family from young."

She now has five children, a number that makes you wonder how she has managed to squeeze in 12-hour work days, delivering babies and setting up a centre. She says it boils down to knowing her priorities at different points in her life.

"We must have priorities in life. Know your big rocks and then fill up your life with the rest," she says. Her big rocks are date nights with her husband, lunch with her sons or daughters (or just to share some one-on-one time over an ice cream) and family days.

"I have come to value time. Every slice of moment is precious because you can't buy it," she says. While she seems to already have her hands full, she says with amusement that she could still fit in more kids. "I look at my children (her eldest is now 25) and I ask myself, 'Where did all my babies go? Where did all these adults come from?'" she laughs.

While many career women struggle with the guilt of not being there all the time for their children, she doesn't. Her children are very independent. It doesn't mean that missing there 24 hours would have made them better or more successful."

Being a doctor was always something she aspired to be.



"I do my best and that's what I can offer. Not perfection but excellence."

The ambitious seed was planted by her mother who was a nurse. "She used to bring me to hospitals and encouraged me to become a doctor. She used to say that I would lead a good life because as a doctor you get to do good and good will come back to you."

(She admits though that at one point, she also wanted to follow in the pirouetting footsteps of Margaret Fontaine and become a ballerina.)

Her mother's wisdom has stayed with her and her mission in life is to inspire, motivate and create a healthier life for people. "When I was worried about passing my medical exams, I made a pledge to God that if I passed, I would give back to the community."

These days, she is actively involved in various activities such as volunteering at free women's medical clinics for the underprivileged, giving talks and seminars to create better awareness of health issues and other activities organised by NGOs, pharmaceutical companies and so on.

"If you don't share, there's no joy. Whatever you have is yours. When I share, I gain more knowledge. And I like to learn new things because it keeps me young," she says. Her thirst for knowledge is not just limited to the medical industry. She enjoys attending conferences in all fields. "I want to know about everything!"

Her vision for the health industry in Malaysia is the opening up of more women's wellness centres as well as "good women's hospitals that really cater for the woman." Basically she wants to create a healthier future for Malaysian women and their families.

Her philosophy is that health and beauty are inseparable. "A lot of women emphasise on beauty. They spend tons of money on clothes and makeup. If only this was invested in health then everything else would make more sense."

There is one thing that she wishes she had done before: "To have started Primanora earlier." But she recognises that her time spent working for hospitals was necessary. "I think I had to grow as a person first and to become who I am now so that I can actually walk my talk."

Her secret to success? "Be focused. Know your mission in life, then your life will be more meaningful. Know why you are here because you have a purpose and you make a difference. If your mission doesn't resonate with your job, then you won't be happy."