

Listen to Your Body

Dialogue with a Doctor Series: Oxford Orthopaedics Founder Dr James Wee

In April 2002, much of the world came to learn the meaning of the word "Metatarsal" when former Manchester United midfielder and England football captain David Beckham broke a bone in his foot while playing in a Champions League match, sparking fears that he would not be fit for the World Cup which was to take place in less than two months' time. The injury dominated sports sections across the globe for many days as his recovery was tracked every step of the way. Beckham eventually recovered in time to play in the World Cup.

Beyond broken bones, there are many other types of bone and soft tissue injuries that we can sustain while playing sports or during the course of our daily lives. These injuries can prevent us from playing our favourite sports and even severely affect our quality of life. This is where our trusty orthopaedists come in. Having a good, experienced orthopaedist is key to helping us recover well from these bone and soft tissue injuries.

In this issue, we have the pleasure of speaking with one of Singapore's top orthopaedists Dr James Wee, founder of Oxford Orthopaedics. He talks to us about health and wellness, his practice as well as his huge Lego collection!

Good morning, Dr Wee. Thank you for having us. Let's start with "Health" and "Wellness": what do these mean to you?

Dr James Wee: Good morning and thank you for having me as well. To me, I think health not only means being physically healthy - without illness or disease, it also entails being in a good state mentally and socially. On the other hand, wellness refers more to an optimal state of health and having a healthy approach to living, so it is more of a mindset.

Do you think you have a healthy lifestyle? How do you balance between health and work?

JW: Sometimes, my work schedule does not allow me to consistently pursue a healthy lifestyle, but I try my best to find

a good balance. It is important to carve some time out of my schedule to take breaks, exercise and spend time with my family.

On some weekends, I may go for a walk in the park with my family, so I get some family time and exercise at the same time. I suppose it is about optimising efficiency and maximising the free time you have. I also set aside time to do some jogging or play basketball.

Speaking of which, have you always been an active person? Besides jogging and basketball, how do you keep in shape?

JW: I have always been active since I was young. I used to play all the usual youngster sports like basketball and football.

However, the past 5 months have been very work and surgery-heavy, so I have not been able to exercise as much as I used to. Prior to that, besides playing some basketball during the weekends, I would do a bit of calisthenics and weight training in between jobs.

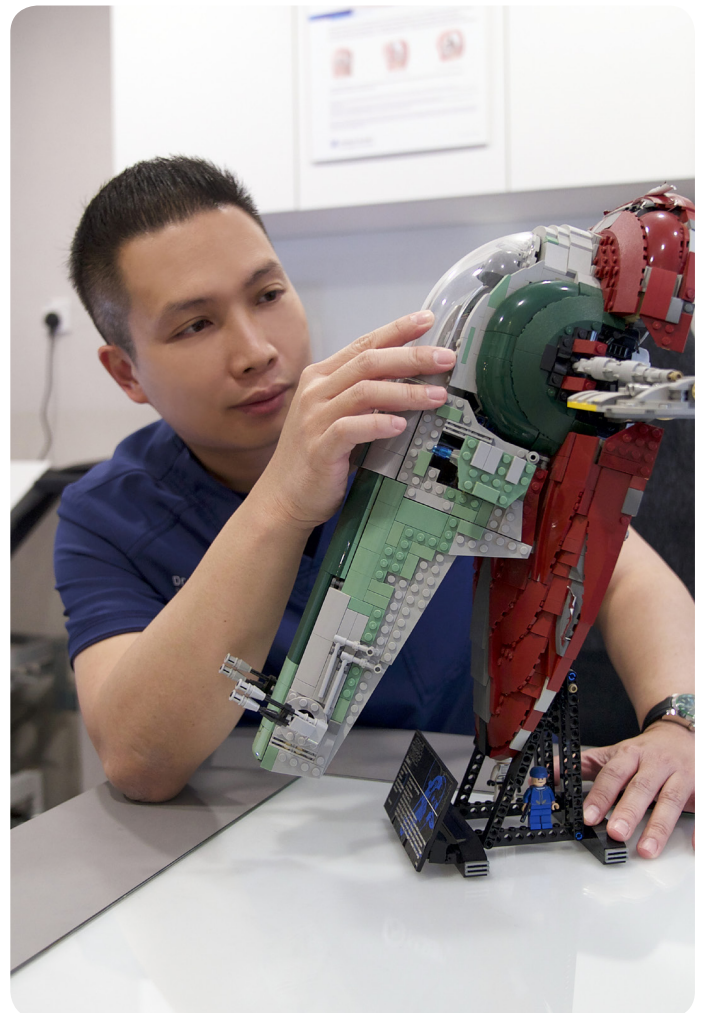
I suppose orthopaedic surgery itself is also a good form of strength training! As orthopaedic surgeons, our surgeries are often part of our "strength-training programme". It is like a whole-body workout!

Any activities with your kids?

JW: Recently, my kids wanted to start learning how to play tennis, so my wife and I have started learning with them too!

Besides exercise, having ample rest is also important to good health. How many hours of sleep do you get daily? Is it adequate?

JW: I try to get ample rest when work allows, but this is not always possible with my hectic work schedule. Many years of training and sleep deprivation as a surgical trainee does



acclimatise you to the long work hours. That being said, when possible, I try to get 6-7 hours of sleep when I can.

Tell us why you chose orthopaedics as your specialty?

JW: Basically, orthopaedics is about fixing bones or soft tissue structures, such as ligaments and tendons, that are damaged or broken. Even in my free time, I do things like build Lego models, which I would say is pretty similar to my work. You build a nice Lego model (your desired result) using precision, patience and attention to detail, which is the same when it comes to getting good outcomes for your patients.

Also, orthopaedics is very mechanical. You really work with a lot of instruments and tools in fixing broken structures; I would say more directly than many other specialties.

I also like the fact that we get to see very immediate results in orthopaedics. When a patient comes in with a broken hip or broken bone and you fix his/her injuries, you will see him/her start walking or moving straight away. This is gratifying. You know you have helped improve someone's quality of life with

This policy ensures that while the doctors work hard, they also have time for a healthy lifestyle, a stable family life and are able to pursue their own interests. I think the cap allows them to keep a good work-life balance.

In my opinion, while we are striving towards reaching the same kind of model locally - where we keep to a certain number of hours of work, I think we sometimes still hold the mentality that we ought to work harder. I think that is the gap that we have to bridge when it comes to our mindsets.

In your line of work, what aspects of health do you often see people neglecting?

JW: I often see a lot of people neglecting their injuries, or rather, what they perceive to be minor injuries. By the time they come in for a consultation, the injuries have sometimes deteriorated from minor injuries to major ones. This means that they need a longer time to recover, have longer hospital stays and higher medical bills. This tends to be especially true among younger patients who get into high-intensity exercises like HIIT. They do a lot of lifting exercises like deadlifts and squats, and seem to

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your work when you see a patient coming in in a wheelchair to seek your help and then being able to walk well after your successful treatment.

Lego! Tell us about your Lego collection!

JW: What can I say? It is too big, hahaha! I am running out of space to keep them! Mainly, my focus is on Star Wars sets, modular buildings and some of the Creator Expert vehicles. I always tell my patients that the collection they see in the clinic is actually the overflow - the ones that have been evicted from the home by my wife!

On a serious note, this hobby really helps me to unwind from work and it also helps me hone my patience. With Lego, you start with small building blocks until you eventually achieve a very big structure. That takes time, patience and perseverance.

We are approaching the last part of the interview where we ask about some of your personal thoughts. Let's start off by talking about some things we can learn from other countries in the way health and wellness are viewed or approached.

JW: During my Orthopaedic Fellowship in the UK, I noticed that they put great emphasis on a cap on the number of hours of work - from junior doctors all the way through to senior doctors working in the National Health Service.

assume that when they experience some pain in their joints, it is just part of their training. The truth is: if it drags on for more than a few days, you should probably seek medical attention.

And if it lasts for over a week, it cannot be just the normal aches and pains of training. If you get help earlier, these injuries will also be treated earlier. This usually results in very good outcomes. However, if you come in very late for treatment, you will have to spend a longer time in rehabilitation and recovery, which also affects your outcome.

Moving on, do you think COVID-19 has changed the way people view and value health?

JW: Yes, I think people take their health less for granted nowadays. When something like this (pandemic) comes along, it makes everyone more aware of their mortality and also how easily their health can be lost if they do not take care of it.

Final word: what advice do you have for people to stay healthy?

JW: Listen to your body. You would generally know when something is not quite right. Early diagnosis and treatment are always essential for the best outcomes when it comes to health-related issues. It is important not to write off chronic aches and pains as just “muscle soreness”. **PRIME**