



“I see my job as being similar to that of a pilot. The key point is you must be able to control everything. You must be able to control each of your staff who are working closely with you in the operation room.”

Interview

Professor Vichai Benjacholamas, M.D. Cardiac Surgeon

Dr. Vichai specializes in both adult cardiac and pediatric cardiac surgery. He has completed more than 2,000 cases and worked as a heart surgeon for almost 20 years - spending more time in the operating room than at home. He has been involved in a number of life saving incidents, completing heart surgery on highly respected people including; a high profile president for Bangpakok Hospital Group and a Venerable Grand Father Monk from Photsomporn Temple in Udon Thani.

Q: How do you diagnose a patient with heart disease?

A: The patient will first visit a cardiologist followed by a doctor's final opinion on whether heart surgery should be carried out or not - if the answer is yes, then they will visit me. For the cardiologist there are many ways to diagnose a patient. One of

them includes carrying out an echocardiography. If the team of doctors are unclear about the results, we will arrange a conference to discuss the findings. We may decide to carry out further investigations such as cardiac MRI or cardiac catheterization.

Q: What tools and machinery are used to support the treatment of heart disease?

A: I have to use a number of tools for diagnosis such as those involved in an echocardiography. Before surgery we need to complete a coronary angiogram or cardiac catheterization. It is essential to have the correct tools, without them we cannot work. For pediatric heart disease we need tools specifically for child diagnosis, these are generally much smaller than those used on adults. For adult heart disease we use single-plane cardiovascular X-ray

system - but if it is for a child, we need to use a bi-plane machine. If a patient visits me with an echocardiography test from another hospital, I will ask my staff to repeat the test for them so I can be sure of the result. If the test was incorrect the results could be catastrophic so I need to be sure before making a decision. Another option is to use an MRI machine to check heart condition with radioactive waves.

Q: The job of a heart surgeon carries immense responsibility. How do you approach your work and how cautious do you have to be?

A: The word 'cautious' is not really strong enough to describe my work. I see my job as being similar to that of a pilot. The key point is you must be able to control everything. You must be able to control each of your staff

who are working closely with you in the operation room.

Q: When performing heart surgery, how many staff are you managing?

A: More than 10 people in some cases. There will be at least three heart surgeons and 2 nurses for handling instruments. If we are performing a coronary artery bypass case then we need more staff for picking away blood vessels within the legs and arms. Around the operating table there are many staff including an anesthetist and in-house doctor. There are nurses outside the operation room and on stand-by to fetch medical equipment and tools in an emergency situation. There are also personnel standing-by to check blood amounts and heart-lung machine readings, etc.

One of my medical students, Komprom Saengaram, M.D., is the son of Ms. Kannika Thammakesorn, a well-known pioneer in news broadcasting. Dr. Komprom is also a heart surgeon. He decided one day to become a pilot and was selected for an interview. One of the interviewers asked him, "What's your career?" He answered, "I am a heart surgeon." The interviewer said, "perfect!" This was because they believed a pilot and heart surgeon have similar job traits and ways of thinking. Like a pilot, a heart surgeon must check every step and be fully aware of risk points.

Q: Why did you decide to become a heart surgeon?

A: Because it's a challenge. When I can complete a very difficult task, I feel sure in myself and have a great sense of accomplishment. When I was a young medical student the money was also an appeal. However, when I started my medical career in Thailand, we could only perform



heart valve changes and those patients requiring a coronary artery bypass were required to fly overseas.

At that time, heart valve surgery was a very challenging and difficult process – I liked the challenge. The first heart surgery in a private practice in Thailand took place at Saint-Louis Hospital and was performed by Dr. Janya Manothai. He was my teacher.

Q: What advice would you give for people who want to take better care of their health after surgery.

A: Many people do not take good care of their health following surgery. After completing surgery following the disease, they will for a short while be aware of their health. If they do

not suffer from any pain for a long period, they often start mistreating their body again. I would offer simple advice such as do not smoke, eat plenty of vegetables and fish, and perform regular exercise. Sometimes it can be hard to remind oneself of this, as people love eating delicious food and forget about their health. Many patients listen to the advice but do not strictly follow it after surgery.

