

He Who Knows Most, Lives Longest

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Ordinarily, I would be more of the opinion that ignorance is bliss. However, a recent encounter with diabetic retinopathy and an unconventional Valentine's Day present has made me agree with Dr. Fok – *When it comes to diabetes, he who knows most, lives longest!*

On the 16th December 2016, I had a shock. My eye doctor told me, I had developed diabetic retinopathy in both eyes. Diabetic retinopathy is the most common cause of blindness among diabetics, and vision impairment among working age adults. High blood sugar levels damage the tiny blood vessels that deliver blood to the retina. Overtime the blood vessels begin to leak fluids which cause swelling, and that's bad news. The next day, I had laser eye surgery to block the leaks. The surgery removes the problem, but the body can recreate it. Guerrilla warfare had started in my eyes.

The Monkey in My Pocket

Over the years, I have come to think of my diabetes as the monkey in my pocket. Most of the time, it is happy enough to bounce along with whatever I am doing. Occasionally though it has a fit of rage and demands my full attention. On the 16th December, and perhaps even now, it was not 100% clear to me how bad my retinopathy was. I knew if it was untreated, I'd go blind and this terrified me. In the doctor's surgery, I thought *'I'll face this head on. I'll learn brail like Blake Lively in The Age of Adeline'*. By the time I got home, my optimism had turned into fits of tears. I was angry and I blamed myself.

Diabetes is a constant balancing act of food, insulin and exercise. Over the years, my inability to get the balance just right has made me think I am intelligent on paper, but a little stupid in the real world. Till recently, I had regular HbA1C's of 8 or above. This is the three monthly test that all type one diabetics have. It should be 6.5 or lower, which has always seemed impossible to me. I could run half marathons, and cope with a busy job, so who cared what my HbA1C said. I ignored the doctors warnings believing my body wouldn't let me down.

The White Angel on My Arm

Since arriving in Singapore, a friendly Dr. Fok has become my diabetes doctor. He pushed me again and again to buy a Free Style Libre – a small disc that puts a tiny incision into your arm and reads your glucose levels 24/7. Dr. Fok, insisted I wasn't a stupid, I was just lacking information to make smart choices. The Free Style Libre wasn't easy to find, and in all honesty I didn't think I wanted it. Who wants a label displayed on their body that screams 'I am sick'? Furthermore, I am getting married in August and the disc didn't match my vision of how I wanted to look on my wedding day. On the 16th December 2016, I changed my mind. My fiancé and I tried to find the Free Style Libre in the UK, and later America without success. I had given up on it, till it came wrapped in red paper on Valentine's Day. My fiancé had found it in Australia. Since wearing the little disc, people have asked me –

'Have you had a mole removed?'

'Are you trying to quit smoking?'

'Is it a posture button?'

'Is it a fitness device?'

I describe it as a miracle. A little white angle that sits on my arm, and whispers, "*blindness is not inevitable*". The machine tells me in two seconds flat what my blood sugar level is, and crucially which direction the glucose is travelling and how rapidly. This additional information allows me to make informed decisions about how much to eat, how far to run and how much to inject. Fast forward to May 2017 and it's time for another HbA1C and another eye test. My results came back at 6.5, and those two little numbers have never been so significant. The diabetic retinopathy is still there, but it is smaller. I am due for another blast of laser surgery at the end of June. I am hopeful that with the little angel on my arm, the monkey will stay in check. The angel will be with me when I walk down the aisle. After all it is white, so it matches my dress very well. If anyone has struggled with diabetes management and blamed it on their own (in)ability, I highly recommend a continuous blood glucose monitor. Like Dr. Fok says, '*When it comes to Diabetes, he who knows most, lives longest*'.

If you are interested in hearing more about my life with Diabetes, please check out my [short story](#) of how I was diagnosed.

Medical Contacts in Singapore

Endocrinologist

[Dr. Fok is at Mount Elizabeth Hospital.](#)

Ophthalmologist

[Dr. Steve Siah is at Camden Medical Centre.](#)

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