

In Conversation with Kim Hayes

Photographs by Michael Bernabe



How best to describe the uniquely multi-faceted health facility that Australian DR KIM HAYES has built up over the past six and a half years? “Clinic” simply doesn’t do it justice. **Verne Maree** finds out more.

I love an opportunity to visit the leafy enclave of black-and-white colonial heritage buildings that is Rochester Park. Its hillside location and the welcome shade cast by tall old trees make it feel a couple of degrees cooler than the rest of the island.

A huge amount has happened since I first met Dr Kim Hayes around eight years ago, when she was with what was then “the only expat clinic in town”, Mel & Partners.

In 2007, Kim took the life-changing decision to go out on her own.

“Starting our own business was a big step, but as there was nowhere else here to work that shared my medical philosophy, it was the only thing to do. We decided that if we were going to do it, we were going to do it properly: we found these premises and realised that they were absolutely perfect. Apart from being conveniently located between our home and our children’s school, UWCSEA, Rochester Park has the kind of heritage character that you can’t find in a shopping mall. And when we looked for a location for our recently opened second branch, we found the same sort of heritage character in an atmospheric Katong shophouse.”

How it all works

Though in this case it’s an acronym for Complete Healthcare International, the name CHI was also chosen because

it evokes the eastern philosophical concept of *chi*, meaning “life force”, reflecting a holistic approach to healing. The term “holistic” itself is terribly abused, Kim agrees, but in the case of CHI it’s genuinely applicable. Their aim is to treat the whole person, and not merely the symptoms of ill health.

CHI is a medical clinic, comprising around six GPs. Body with Soul is the overarching company that encompasses CHI, the café, plus a range of other health practitioners. They currently include osteopaths, a women’s health physio who does general physio too, a podiatrist, a nutritionist and a psychologist. “We also have a new naturopath and a new TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) practitioner,” Kim tells me.

Challenges

“Coming straight from a medical degree, with no business, accounting or management experience, meant that establishing all this was a very steep learning curve,” says Kim. It’s one she’ll never regret, though. “It’s been an amazing journey, and I’ve learnt an incredible amount.”

But even that has not been her greatest challenge – that would be staffing.

“In any expat practice, your people tend to relocate overseas. Each time that happens, it leaves a hole that must be filled. The most difficult thing is not to settle for whoever comes along, but to wait for and to choose the *right* medical or administrative team member. If we do that right, it pays off a thousand times. If we didn’t, we would suffer the consequences every time, so we’re very careful.”





What does Kim look for in a doctor for her team? “He or she must be a good GP, have postgraduate training, and be a great person. People skills are all-important, especially here.”

Her current team is a mixture of nationalities, she says. “Our local doctors have had the benefit of international training, which has given them invaluable exposure to different cultural nuances.”

The CHI GPs have regular meetings to discuss particular patient issues; and every two or three months, all the Body with Soul practitioners get together. “It’s so important to talk to each other: two heads are always better than one.”

Highlights

“Every time we appoint a very good doctor who fits in perfectly, it’s a triumph that energises the team afresh,” says Kim. “And I’ve always wanted to expand so that more people could experience our level of patient care, so the opening of our 221 East Coast Road branch has been a real highlight for me. Its shophouse architecture is quintessentially Singaporean; it’s a very special place.”

Patients can be highlights, too. “Every time our clinic can heal someone, I feel very happy. It’s what I really love to do and thrive on most of all – as I think my patients would also tell you!”

“Today I saw a ‘new’ patient,” she recounts, “a woman in her 30s whom I treated many years ago when she was a schoolgirl living in Singapore with her expat parents. Now she’s returned here to live and work, she has found me and come back to consult with me.”

There do seem to be more long-term expats in Singapore these days; and this practice tends to see more patients from that category, says Kim.

“However, I never expected as an expat doctor to have that sort of continuity through generations. It makes me feel very lucky.”

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Onwards and upwards

Already a busy GP and business manager, how does Kim find time to study for a fellowship in the rapidly growing field of Nutritional and Environmental Medicine?

“It’s absolutely essential for us as doctors to constantly keep educating ourselves,” she explains. “Patients nowadays demand better health treatment and they expect better information. Through the internet, so much is already at their fingertips, and they reasonably expect their doctors to be fully abreast of medical and related scientific advances.”


Nutritional medicine is not just the study of food, its nutrients and how diet affects health and wellbeing.

“It’s the study of how the cells of the body work, and everything they need to work correctly,” elaborates Kim. “It’s about correcting imbalances and deficiencies. It includes the study of genetics, and the growing field of epigenetics, which has huge implications, including advances in treating fatigue, sleep problems, mental and behavioural conditions and more. Understanding how a particular body works and what it needs to work correctly can be and often is life-changing.”

Research conflicts

I have to ask: How should the average person react to the mixed and contradictory messages that come out of nutritional research? One report tells us to avoid coffee because of its acidic effect; the next says that some caffeine is actually good for us, as is wine (or other alcohol) in moderation. Apart from nutrition, even the efficacy and possible dangers of some widely used vaccines are coming under the spotlight.

“There are a myriad of such questions,” she replies. “One very topical issue is sunlight: we Australians have been avoiding the sun for so many years, and Vitamin D deficiency has become a real problem.”

Her advice? “Follow the good research: skewed research gives skewed results that aren’t always useful. Find sources of information that you can trust, and choose a doctor whose advice you can trust. Try to keep a balance with everything – try not to swing too far from one extreme to another. For example, yes, we need exposure to sunlight, but it needs to be *safe exposure*.” 

Complete Healthcare International (CHI) and Body With Soul are at 45 Rochester Drive.
6776 2288 | bodywithsoul.com