

Local healthcare focus: Cardiology and skin cancer services available at Ochre Medical Centre Bruce



Ochre Medical Centre Bruce, on the University of Canberra campus just off Ginninderra Drive, has added cardiology to its comprehensive range of health services and it has also expanded its team of doctors focusing on skin cancer.

Cardiologist Dr Nikhil Pal is seeing patients every fortnight and Dr Chi So is available three days a week for skin checks.

Dr Pal moved to the ACT from Tasmania in late 2023 to set up the keyhole heart valve surgery program at Canberra Hospital. His journey to becoming a leading specialist in his field began in India. He says, "It was really simple. Both of my parents were doctors and I always wanted to become a doctor."

Dr Pal completed medical school in India and moved to the UK at the age of 23, where he trained as a junior doctor and first started doing cardiology work. He continued his training at Oxford University as an interventional cardiologist where he obtained another PhD. Between 2011 and 2018, he worked at the university in both a clinical capacity and as an academic.

Dr Pal then advanced his expertise in structural cardiology in the UK before undertaking a fellowship at Flinders Medical Centre in Adelaide, one of Australia's more highly regarded cardiology centres. Deciding to make Australian home, he did complex procedural work in Hobart and Launceston including Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation (TAVI). This is where a new aortic valve is implanted into the patient's heart without having to perform open-heart surgery – particularly beneficial for older patients and with a much quicker recovery time. He also became skilled in complex stenting procedures.

Now based in Canberra, Dr Pal

appreciates the opportunity to see patients as a resident specialist at Ochre. "It gives me the balance between practicing as a physician and doing interventional procedures." He is enjoying building patient relationships and taking full ownership of their healing journeys.

Dr Pal describes a routine checkup in his new Ochre clinic revealing heart valve disease in an otherwise fit and youthful patient. Communicating the need for surgery and getting the patient to come to terms with it was a process that required a combination of skill and sensitivity. "I explained everything fully to him and even showed him live images of his heart. It took a lot of guidance to get him into surgery but now, three months on, he is doing well and there is a measure of trust that took that time and action to build."

Away from the clinic, Dr Pal is focused on his family. His education in matters of the heart continues as he is charmed by his 18-month-old daughter!

With spring here, a timely reminder about skin cancer prevention

Growing up in Canberra, Dr Chi So (right) decided at a young age to be a doctor after witnessing a friend's mother succumb to cancer. He says, "I saw how it affected my friend and I realised I wanted to make a difference. I was always good at the sciences, so it was a natural progression from there."

He completed his medical degree in Armidale and returned to Canberra to do his internship and residency. "At that stage I couldn't decide on a specialty, so decided to go down the GP route."

Dr So continued his training, taking up positions in Wagga Wagga and Cooma, where he gained valuable experience in general medicine before being admitted as a Fellow to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners in 2017. During this time, he found that that he had a natural ability to perform surgical procedures. "I was

good with my hands and other doctors started referring patients to me whenever some kind of minor procedure was required."

"I was constantly dealing with skin lesions, so I decided to focus on skin cancer medicine."

This decision led to Dr So completing the Master of Medicine (Skin Cancer) program at the University of Queensland, followed by five years working with a plastic surgeon back in Canberra. He has gone on to become an expert in the field, with several of his research papers published in international journals.

Dr So is passionate about prevention, especially in Australia which has one of the highest skin cancer rates in the world. "I see a lot of skin cancers that do not actually look like cancers. They are not brown or black, but pink and quite benign looking."



He explains some of the reasons his patients undergo a preventative skin check are severe sunburn, anything new growing on the skin and previous use of solariums. "People who burn easily should be particularly vigilant and if they have had a lot of unprotected sun exposure in childhood, this could definitely affect them later in life."

He stresses that despite his surgical skills, there are many non-surgical treatments, and he

draws on his experience as a GP to discuss with patients the best treatment for their condition.

Dr So enjoys the arts and can be found reading or enjoying a long walk, when not at the skin cancer clinic.

Dr Nikhil Pal and Dr Chi So are accepting patients at Ochre Medical Centre Bruce. Bookings can be made via ochrehealth.com.au or by calling the practice on 6180 8500.