

LIFE & TIMES **HEALTH**

Age's not just a number

When it comes to ageing, it's all in the genes. **Aneeta Sundararaj** finds out more from one expert

DR JOSEPH Chang's easy manner makes you comfortable the moment you meet him, especially when he says: "I'm just a regular guy."

Then, when he tells you his age, you do a double take. The man is 59 but looks at least 15 years younger. Sensing surprise, he says: "See, I don't need to say any more. Interview over. I've convinced you that what I'm doing works."

What, exactly, does Chang do? Describing his life as a "series of accidents", Ipoh-born Chang explains that upon being conferred a PhD in Pharmacology in the UK, he was recruited by several universities and pharmaceutical companies to develop medicinal drugs.

Eventually, wanting to focus his attention on developing a product that will prevent rather than treat diseases, he teamed up with a friend and created a company called Pharmanex. "I wanted to see if I could

slow down the ageing process and, thereby, delay the onset of age related diseases such as diabetes. So, we focused on creating the next generation of health supplements.

"Previously, people thought that supplements were just ground-up leaves and snake oil. We wanted to look deeper. We wrote out a business plan to get funding to study supplements scientifically and managed to raise US\$46 million (RM146m), in which half of it went to research and development."

When they came up with their science-based nutritional supplements, their story resonated with some of the big companies like Walmart and Walgreen (largest pharmacy chains in the US). "We managed to convince over 38,000 stores to sell our products."

Soon, other companies wanted to buy the licence to develop Pharmanex products. Of these, Chang remembers three in particular. In the end, Chang accepted the offer from Nu Skin Enterprises Inc, an American direct selling company that develops and distributes personal care products and nutritional supplements.

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Joseph Chang

our product to the next level and to bring it to an international market. It had a channel of distribution (direct-selling) that we were comfortable with."

He is now the company's chief scientific officer and executive vice president of product development.

A prolific author, Chang has distilled all of his knowledge and experiences into his bestselling book, *The Aging Myth*, which also looks at the study and understanding of how changes in the way our genes talk to our cells contribute to the ageing process.

"It's all about our genes," Chang explains animatedly. "There's no need to go looking for the fountain of youth or Eldorado. Just look inside yourself. There's no such thing as bad genes. In general genes are good. It's how they behave that's bad. And this is entirely dependent on our lifestyle like smoking, overeating and stress, and environment."

"Ageing is a complicated process," he adds. "Think of it this way: The body is like a symphony. And it's the orchestra of over 25,000 genes that's playing this symphony. As you get older, the accumulation of dirt on the genes doesn't allow it to function optimally. So we need

50 per cent of that. I could have an impact on another human being." He did wonder what his son would grow up to be. Then, exasperated, he throws his hand in the air and says: "He wants to be a lawyer!"

Although he's lived in the US for more than 30 years, Chang admits to yearning for Malaysia. "You can take the boy out of Ipoh, but you can't take the Ipoh out of the boy."

What he misses most about Ipoh is the noodles. "You can't duplicate those noodles, I tell you. Not even in KL. It must be that Ipoh water. It's special."

Despite his obvious love for the land of his birth, Chang remains frustrated by one particular issue. "This country has a lot of potential and none of it is being maximised. Its biodiversity is amazing. It has one of the oldest rainforests in the world and some of the plants are magical. The academics don't know how to commercialise the knowledge they have and that's sad," he says.

Bottom line, Chang believes that one does not have to buy into the myths of ageing. He believes that the destiny of your genes is not fixed and that, by your habits, you can have a positive impact on the way you age.

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