

MEDIA RELEASE

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Gender and language are no barrier for top female scientist, who couldn't speak English when she arrived in Australia as a teenager.



Dr Angelina Lay didn't go to school until she was 12, because it was simply too dangerous for her to leave the house. Angelina grew up in East Timor while it was under the occupation of Indonesian troops, when survival was the priority and education was on hold. Many schools closed, with parents keeping their children safely at home in a region where it wasn't uncommon for East Timorese to "disappear" if they ventured out.

When it was finally deemed safe, Angelina was thrilled to go to school, looking forward to the things many children take for granted, "I recall being so excited to finally attend school and wear a school uniform," says Angelina.

The situation in the region soon deteriorated again, but fortunately, Angelina was able to migrate to Australia with some of her family members. She was excited to continue her education despite knowing no English, entering grade 11 at an Australian high school, "I had a few friends, but as you can imagine that was tough." She made the most of the opportunity, "I worked hard and got into UNSW studying an advanced science degree."

Angelina excelled at school and University. “My Honours was a great experience, I developed a love for science and decided to pursue a career in medical research. I completed my PhD with Centenary Institute’s Professor Philip Hogg. We achieved some great things; our research into a new cancer treatment was published in the prestigious journal, Nature. Professor Hogg was even more excited when he discovered that apparently, I am the first female East Timorese with a PhD!”

Angelina overcame the difficulties of moving to a new country, learning another language and the trauma of growing up in a war-zone, so for her, overcoming a clear gender bias in science, was just another challenge she knew she could take on. Around the world, more women are studying science but women are still not reaching leadership roles at the same rate as their male colleagues. On the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, Angelina is telling her story to demonstrate to aspiring female scientists, that it is possible to succeed in what is still a largely male dominated field.

Today, Angelina works with Centenary Institute’s Molecular Hepatology Lab, investigating a type of chronic liver disease known as liver fibrosis. The team is investigating how fibrotic liver disease progresses. By understanding this process, they will improve early detection and develop more effective therapies to reverse fibrosis before it becomes cirrhosis and liver cancer. Liver cancer is the fastest growing cancer killer in Australia.

Angelina has two kids, and she says there is a science to having a successful career and a family, “being a full time scientist and a mum is a balancing act. You are constantly running around and you never stop thinking about your work and family and how to run both smoothly.” Angelina’s husband is also a fulltime senior scientist, “life can get tricky when we both need to be at work and the kids are sick. Fortunately, Centenary and CSIRO have flexible work policies so we can work from home, so we manage alright.”

Angelina says, modern flexible work places are the key to supporting women to rise to the top in their careers, alongside their male colleagues. She hopes that by the time her own daughter enters the workforce, she is offered the same opportunities as her son and that just like Angelina, she doesn’t let obstacles stand in her way, especially not her gender.

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