

# Quick recovery with single-incision lung op



“

## SAFETY FIRST

Recovery is important, but more important is to do a safe and good operation... That is the most important criterion.

– Dr John Tam of National University Heart Centre, who still does open surgery in risky cases

”

Dr Tam, surrounded by his patients (from left) Grace Kumala, 88; Alphonsius Anapaku, 65; and Cheong Yip Chong, 66. Thanks to his minimally invasive surgery technique, Madam Kumala was discharged within a week of the operation.

PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

By LINETTE LAI

THERE are no cracked ribs or torn muscles after Dr John Tam finishes his lung surgery – only a single 3cm-long scar.

Dr Tam, head of thoracic surgery at the National University Heart Centre, developed this minimally invasive technique because he felt conventional open surgery caused patients too much pain.

Since first using the method in 2009, he has treated more than 300 patients.

In typical open surgery, the surgeon cuts muscles and may break bones as he tries to get access to the lungs, leaving a large scar.

Doing so is easier for the surgeon, said 40-year-old Dr Tam, because he has “a big space to work”. Recovery, however, can take up to three months.

“What’s easy for the surgeon is hard on the patient,” he said. “It’s one of the most painful operations people can do.”

Dr Tam published a paper on his technique in the journal *Annals Of Thoracic Surgery* last month.

It involves inserting a tiny camera and other surgical instruments between the patient’s ribs to cut out diseased tissue.

While other minimally invasive techniques exist, most require three to four cuts.

Only about 30 per cent of surgeons use

these techniques, said Dr Tam, with most favouring the traditional open surgery.

Fewer than five surgeons in the world use the single-incision method.

One of his patients was 88-year-old Grace Kumala, who found out last year that she had stage 1 lung cancer and had to have a tumour removed.

“Doctors told me I would have to have two big cuts in my back,” she said.

“I was so worried – if I get cut, I might die. But if I don’t, I might also die.”

Madam Kumala stopped taking painkillers three days after Dr Tam performed the surgery and was discharged within a week.

Most patients who have undergone his minimally invasive procedure have been in their 60s and 70s. Half had cancer while the rest had other chest conditions such as infections.

Dr Tam said he still performs traditional open surgery in cases where his technique might prove risky – for example, if a tumour is too big – even though the recovery process takes much longer.

“Recovery is important, but more important is to do a safe and good operation,” Dr Tam said.

“That is the most important criterion.”

✉ [linettel@sph.com.sg](mailto:linettel@sph.com.sg)