

PROGRAM DATE: 2026-09-03

PROGRAM NAME: WOMANITY - WOMEN IN UNITY

GUEST NAME: DR. MELODY SUN – OPHTHALMOLOGIST AND REFRACTIVE SURGEON

	TRANSCRIPTION
DR. MALKA	Hello, I'm Dr. Amaleya Goneos-Malka. Welcome to 'Womanity– Women in Unity'. The show that celebrates women's milestone achievements in their struggle for liberation, self-emancipation, human rights, democracy, and much more.
DR. MALKA	Joining us today is Dr. Melody Sun, who is a General Ophthalmologist and a Refractive Surgeon in private practice, whose passion for problem-solving and restoring vision has led her to a career that combines medicine, technology, and the precision of delicate surgery. Welcome to the show!
DR. SUN	Thank you Amaleya. Thank you for having me. I am excited to be part of this interview, and I am excited to get started with the session.
DR. MALKA	Starting with your journey into medicine, what was it about medicine that attracted you to the field in the first place?
DR. SUN	Thinking back, I have always had an interest in the human body and how it works. It's really fascinating that the human body is made of all these different intricate systems that operate on their own without any conscious input and keep the body going and keep the body alive, but medicine is not just the human body alone. It is also about people being human beings, and that plays a huge part in how we see and practice medicine. Also, on a personal side, growing up, I was in a household or a family that had this fear regarding diseases, regarding being sick; it's almost associated with possible death. As young kids, we weren't allowed to go to hospitals to protect ourselves from getting sick, and so I think part of me wanted to overcome it, to understand the human body better, understand why we get sick, because modern medicine is also really amazing. We understand how to treat a lot of these diseases, and part of me wanted to know it to overcome that fear.
DR. MALKA	That's such an interesting insight and I think when we're growing up, that our sphere of influence really does come from family and friends and I'd imagine it must have been quite a challenge on your side to sort of confront that and say, you know what actually, if we really understand the body, if we understand health, if we understand the medical possibilities that are available, you don't need to be afraid.
DR. SUN	So, you don't need to be afraid. It's not like back in the day when you got consumption and almost your life was over. So, we've come a long way, and it's exciting, because it's also nice to see how longevity improves, and that's also a very interesting field.
DR. MALKA	But it is such a reality, and I think that it really shows that we will never be done with educating. We have to be persistent and keep up on, just go and get treated.
DR. SUN	Exactly.
DR. MALKA	And now thinking specifically about the eye, what ultimately captured your attention and led you to specialise in Ophthalmology?
DR. SUN	So, in honesty, throughout medical training and then going into internship and community service, there was very little exposure regarding the eye.

	So, during that period there was no idea that this specialty was a possibility. During my training years, the main focus was on the bigger systems, the gastrointestinal tract, the cardiac system, etcetera, and so at the end of my training I was actually more at a loss as to what specialty to choose. I know deep down I did want a surgical specialty, but wasn't really sure exactly in what field, and it was more a suggestion or recommendation by dad, who is not a doctor, he is actually a businessman who had a conversation with his own ophthalmologist, and he felt that it would be a specialty that suited me, and I'm actually grateful for him for the suggestion and have no regrets going into ophthalmology, because when I went further into it, I really enjoyed how delicate it is. The eye itself can really show signs of what's actually happening in the rest of the body, so it's not definitely just isolated to the eye, and it has its own complete world in the globe. So, it is a very fascinating field, and it really does combine aspects of medicine and surgery, and in surgery, we use microscopes for the surgery; it is fine, delicate work, and say surgery like cataract surgery, which can take approximately 15 to 20 minutes, can really make a huge difference in somebody's life.
DR. MALKA	Amazing, really, and I'm thinking about so many things that you've said, is that one that the system of the eye is almost indicative of the ecosystem of the whole body on health, but it's also got its own issues.
DR. SUN	Yes. You actually put it really nicely, and this is exactly what it is.
DR. MALKA	And thinking back still on the early phase of your journey, you started your career busy doing your degree, attaining an MBCHB at UCT; your ophthalmology training was at Wits; then becoming a surgeon, a refractive surgeon and ophthalmologist. During this journey, what would you say have been some of the defining moments or challenges in your career, especially as a woman in a highly specialized surgical field?
DR. SUN	So, thinking back, when you are young, and you're starting this journey, surgery itself is a relatively stressful field. You have to be able to work under pressure, and kindness and encouragement go a long way. So, thinking back when I started in the ophthalmology department as a medical officer, we do start learning how to operate, and learning how to operate in the eye is a very steep learning curve, and having this senior, so at that time it was a senior registrar who sat with me for some of my cataract procedures, and giving me that encouragement and saying that, yes, I have good hands, I can do this procedure, I will be a good surgeon, that really goes a long way in this whole journey. And even as a woman, it doesn't mean only women support women; it's really nice when men also support women. So, thinking back it was actually a male registrar, who is also a good friend now, who gave me that encouragement along the way, and it actually means a lot when you're starting off in specializing. Then another defining moment is once you have finished specializing, I mean, once you're finished getting your FC in ophthalmology, so you are an ophthalmologist often we also then sub-specialize, we find our sub interests and I'm grateful for my mentor, who I worked with in private practice, Dr. Lourens Coetzee, taking me on as a fellow and through an international programme, the Refractive Surgery Alliance. It is a two-year fellowship programme that we can do, and then we have to be in the centre that offers refractive surgery and that we can do the procedures. So, it's

	great having him take me, and that is what I was capable of, actually learning what refractive surgery is about. Another defining moment is that at the end of two years, he trusted me enough to do his own eyes.
DR. MALKA	Wow!
DR. SUN	So, I did LASIK for his eyes.
DR. MALKA	That is certainly a confirmation of your strength and your capabilities.
DR. SUN	Yes. Then as a woman, everyone's experience is a little bit different and historically we haven't been supported enough, especially when we are also going through womanhood, where we want to start a family, when we want to fall pregnant, and often it's always a bit of a struggle when to fit that in, because we feel that if we do get pregnant and we do start family, we're almost lagging behind in this race to specialize or to get a post, but everyone's experiences is always a little bit different, so there are colleagues who did say that when they were pregnant they felt that they were demonised, they had been pregnant, let the whole team down and so their experience wasn't very nice, or they felt the whole being pregnant during that time really tough, and for me, I fell pregnant during my medical officer time and I rotated through this hospital whose head of department was a female, [Dr. Carol Botha], so I was taken under her wing, I was still able to do the work; I didn't feel that I was disliked for being pregnant, and that really did help me through the process. So, I am also grateful for her during that time.
DR. MALKA	That's such an important piece that you raised, because whenever I've had people in medicine on the show, the reality is that your training is years and years and years, and generally it is in sort of the prime peak time of reproductive years.
DR. SUN	Yes.
DR. MALKA	So, being able to accommodate and fit life into work is such an important part, because I mean some people may be living for work, but I think other people are working for living.
DR. SUN	Yes, and everyone to their own, and the idea of it can seem very scary and whatever works for you, but for women it actually is doable, and we're actually really capable of managing a lot. So, it is doable, and so it's how you want to fit building a family into this whole career path. So don't neglect yourself for what you want just for a career.
DR. MALKA	And the other thing that is coming out in this conversation is that you're not participating in somebody else's race; their timing is different to your timing. Focus on you and your career path.
DR. SUN	100%, because you can't compare yourself to somebody's middle or somebody's end. This is your journey, and it can take a very winding route, and also, we can't compare to how a man does it, unfortunately. Often, I come across little quotes that some people feel that medicine is still made for men with the wife at home, and yes, it does make a difference because we do take on a lot, and we do end up managing a lot. So, when we do start a family, we manage what's happening in the household; we manage our children's lives, then manage a career. Then if we go into our own business practice or business clinic, we're managing a business, and then we still remember birthdays on top of everything.
DR. MALKA	So, how do you do it? How do you juggle all of these balls and make things happen?

DR. SUN	Firstly, I do not think I have a perfect balance, and for me it doesn't feel that way at all. How I work is, you appoint a certain amount of attention to certain things, and you just learn to be a lot more organized, for one thing, and certain days, yes, one thing will need more attention than the next. So, yes, today my son needs more attention than the other aspects, but in all of this, I find it's really important not to forget yourself. You have to appoint some time for yourself; otherwise, you don't show up fully, and then you're at risk of burnout. So, in this whole trying to balance it, or trying to get it going, or put it all together, don't neglect yourself. I think that is important.
DR. MALKA	Very wise words. You spoke earlier about some of the, let's say, your focus points and almost like subspecialties, and I noted within refractive surgery there's laser vision correction, there's cataract surgery, there's implantable contact lenses. In layman's terms, can you briefly explain what each of these areas are?
DR. SUN	So, refractive surgery is the blanket term we use in ophthalmology, and it is surgeries that we perform that actually make patients less dependent on glasses or contact lenses. So, it encompasses laser vision corrections such as basic [PRK, SMILE], and then also the implantable contact lenses. So, implantable contact lenses are more suitable for patients if their corneal surface is just not suitable for any laser reshaping procedures. So, with implantable contact lenses, we actually implant the contact lens in the eye, keeping your natural lens, and so the implantable contact lens then sits between the iris and your contact lens, and it actually then takes away your glasses script that you have. So, if you were, for example, like minus 10, then the implantable contact lens corrects that, so then you don't need glasses for a minus 10 script. Then also, nowadays, with modern formulas and more advanced lens-measuring machines, we call them biometers, cataract surgery is slowly moving towards being refractive cataract surgery. So, we have more options where, after cataract surgery, you don't need glasses as often as before. So, we can't always promise 100% glasses-free, but definitely we have achieved up to 90% being glasses-free in your daily life.
DR. MALKA	And since we're a gender-based show, if we can cast a gender lens on eye health, are there any particular eye conditions or vision problems that women are more susceptible to?
DR. SUN	So, women do suffer a bit more with dry eyes as you get older, with hormonal changes, it does affect the glands along the eyelid margin. So, dryness does become more common. Dry eyes often, but it isn't, it really disturbs the whole tear film ecosystem on the surface of the eye, and if you do have a very unstable tear film, your vision quality becomes poor. So, you can see things, but it's often blurry; you have blurred vision, so it can drastically change your vision and your visual quality. The other thing is, during pregnancy, because of hormonal changes, your oestrogen levels go up, and progesterone levels go down a bit, the oestrogen levels actually do weaken the cornea. So, it doesn't happen to everyone, but you can experience vision changes while you're pregnant, and we definitely don't recommend or advocate doing any laser procedures on the cornea when you're pregnant. So, when you're pregnant, [LASIK] is a contraindication. The other aspect is autoimmune diseases are more

	prevalent in females, and then autoimmune diseases do affect the eye, so you can get inflammation in the eye, such as Uveitis, again, you can get dry eyes, and very rarely, but you can also get vasculitis at the back of the eye on the retina, and those are related to autoimmune diseases, where it is more prevalent in females.
DR. MALKA	So, what should I be on the lookout for, potentially, and when should I be concerned, like what are some of the symptoms?
DR. SUN	Regarding dry eyes it's more if you find that you get intermittent or fluctuating vision, then some people do describe having fine body sensation, the eyes do become puffy, they wake up with a lot of grittiness or crusting on the eyelash margin, and then overall they complain of tiredness, and then when they do come in we do look for signs of dry eyes that is actually on the surface. Some people get visual fluctuation, and some people don't. If there are any issues that are treatable, we treat, but we don't recommend, say, changing your glasses. There is no need, and often after pregnancy it actually goes back to the pre-pregnancy state. Then, with patients obviously with autoimmune diseases, in liaison with their rheumatologist, often they get referred to us for an eye health check.
DR. MALKA	Thanks for casting a light on some of the issues that women may encounter, and part of the reason that I raise this is, I continuously read and hear about statistics on the under-investment into research regarding women's health, and the World Economic Forum quoted "6% of private healthcare's capital is spent on conditions affecting women." 6%! And the majority of the 90% of capital that is allocated is invested into cancers, obviously a very important issue, reproductive health, and maternal health. What happens to everything else? And I just wanted to ask, what are some of your views about funding women's health, and in particular, from eye health research in women?
DR. SUN	So, my viewpoint is, women are not just their reproductive systems, so the idea -
DR. MALKA	... Exactly.
DR. SUN	... if only a lot of the funds are just allocated to reproductive health, it is a bit shortsighted, because a lot of the other parts of the body do behave differently to how men behave. It's more a building awareness over time and advocacy to allocate these funds into specific areas, and I think it's good that with these interviews for and then you branching out into the different medical specialties, it's for us doctors in the different specialities that come forth and say okay, actually we feel that there is an issue with this certain disease, or certain condition more related to women, and advocate for funding in these areas.
DR. MALKA	It really is a challenge, and I hope that there is a greater drive towards investing into research regarding women's health, because I mean we're 50% of the population.
DR. SUN	Yes, it sometimes feels more.
DR. MALKA	Now, looking at ophthalmology as a field itself, it does seem to be medically demanding. I mean, you're working on such a small organ that has factors affecting it, and it also requires surgical precision. From your experience, do you consider it to be a female-friendly discipline?
DR. SUN	So, the specialty in itself is more welcoming to women, it definitely has been. So, the Wits circuit is bringing on more, or more posts are allocated to women, which is a good thing, and in terms of, in my viewpoint, if you

	put your mind to it, definitely as a woman you can actually do anything, as long as you feel you're physically and mentally capable of it. So, yes, ophthalmology, in my opinion, definitely is suited for women, and thinking about it, you definitely can actually control your hours a lot better also in this field.
DR. MALKA	And for someone who is in their teens or early career development and may be thinking about a switch, but they're interested in science, or they're interested in surgery, but perhaps don't see themselves, yet, as a future ophthalmologist, what qualities should she nurture if she wants to follow a path like yours?
DR. SUN	So, actually, you don't have to figure your life out when you're 15 or 18. I think at that stage, if you have an interest in medicine, that's a good start, and don't neglect to do maths. To get into medicine, you do need to do maths in high school and physical sciences. So, sometimes if you're not doing the subjects and then you want to do medicine, then you are going to struggle to get in. So, simple things like that, and then doing medicine, you will actually figure out what do you like. It kind of splits into two: you kind of say, okay, I actually like surgery; I am interested in the surgical field, or no, I like medicine more; I would rather go down the medical route. Then when you go into ophthalmology, and especially I was thinking more about a refractive surgeon, the personalities, they actually like doing things repetitively, which is okay, because you want to refine it, you like doing things well, you don't mind taking the necessary steps or the repetitive steps to get where you want to be to refine this procedure and to achieve the best outcome for your patients.
DR. MALKA	As you said, you've got to get those fundamental building blocks in place first; maths, physical science, and in reality, even if you don't choose a path in medicine, maths and physical science are going to benefit you across whatever your options are.
DR. SUN	Yes, and sometimes it's a lot, and initially you think you just need biology, but no, it's not that. You do need those fundamental building blocks, just to get you to the next step.
DR. MALKA	And moving ahead, you obviously did your community service, but you're in practice, and for me, that also comes with not just your specialization and your skill set of being an ophthalmologist, but it's about running a business too.
DR. SUN	Yes. So, I'm actually currently building my own clinic, and it's a whole new learning experience. It is also very humbling, because this is a whole new field I do not know well at all. I'm learning on the go, feeling very uncertain, but actually just taking the next step, because it's good to have a vision in your head, it's good to have a why, why you want to keep going, because some days can feel very tough, because this is out of your comfort zone, it's not related to medicine at all, and just to keep going, but I think at the end of the day it's something of your own, something that gives you the freedom to do a lot more and the freedom to manage and care for patients in your own way.
DR. MALKA	And it's an evolution, I think. It's like you're not limiting your options. You are, in fact, opening up more space.
DR. SUN	Yes, and putting your touch to it in a way, and it just becomes yours
DR. MALKA	I wanted to ask you if you've got any memorable cases that you could share with us?

DR. SUN	So, definitely the cases that stay with surgeons are the complications. Really, because your confidence takes a knock and you really internalize it, rather than seeing it as an external occurrence, but on the flip side, it really makes you grow as a surgeon. We all hate complications; we often say, if you cut, you cry, but it really makes you grow, and it actually makes you a better surgeon. Then the other part of ophthalmology that really makes me happy and really reinforces why I do it, is when patients will come in with bilateral dense cataracts, so very, very, poor vision, at most maybe they can see a bit of light or some movement but really can't make out their surroundings, and when they're brought in, they'll get wheeled in by their families or held by their families, and they often come in quiet and unkempt, because they're unable to groom themselves, and frail and obviously they can't navigate, and the best thing is after their procedure and they come the next day, and then they're able to groom themselves, and then they see themselves well-dressed and put together, and they're smiling, they can recognize you as the surgeon, and then obviously they have a new lease on life and they have a little bit more independence. It's actually amazing to see.
DR. MALKA	That is such an incredible impact.
DR. SUN	Yes, and it's amazing to think it is an eye procedure; it is just a cataract surgery, but it makes a profound difference in somebody's life when they actually can see the world around them and interact with the world around them and actually see their family's faces.
DR. MALKA	And I imagine, like with many things, that when you feel a bit of a niggle you kind of compensate, and you just let things go progressively, without doing anything, which is why they get to such a bad state before they come and present to you.
DR. SUN	Yes. So, often some of the setbacks can be financial. These surgeries, they do cost, because it's also in hospital, so it is not just the fee for the surgeon, there are all these additional costs that come into play, but certain centres definitely do these charity cataract procedures, which is also wonderful, and sometimes people do wait because they have a misconception, they don't really understand why they can't see and they're just hoping it will reverse itself, or they think that cataracts is very scary, but it's a natural process of ageing at the end of the day, and I often tell patients, the longer you live you, you will eventually get cataracts. Some people do develop them earlier, some people later, but eventually you will develop a cataract.
DR. MALKA	Thanks for sharing some of that experience. Now we're coming towards the end of the show, and the questions that I ask are a little bit more about your personal space. So, what I've found over the years is that everybody has got a different recipe regarding their factors of success. Can you tell us, in your opinion, what have been some of the key drivers to your success?
DR. SUN	I do find the word success difficult because I don't feel I've arrived at this destination, but my ultimate is, yes, I find that it is successful that I can practice ophthalmology. I can be in this field where I am inspired by my colleagues and by other ophthalmologists, and in that viewpoint, I can see it as successful, but going from A to B, or to where you want to go, it's important, well, I find, to find your why. Why you want to get there, because everyone's reasons are different, and then the other thing is, keep going. Don't give up, because there's never going to be a straight line, and

	along the way, situations and things can feel really tough, but if you keep going, you will eventually get there, and that's the better outlook. Don't wait to get there to feel okay or to feel happy. Appreciate the journey along the way and every step, because you like yourself more; you appreciate yourself more by the person you become along the journey, not just by reaching the endpoint.
DR. MALKA	That's so valuable. I think there's a saying where they talk about how the journey is in the destination. No, I cannot remember what it is, but it's like part of getting to your destination is the process.
DR. SUN	Yes, and then it's almost the process is actually what is good for you at the end of the day.
DR. MALKA	Now, what have been some of the pivotal moments in your life growing up that have helped define you?
DR. SUN	I think definitely having strong women in my life that made me feel, yes, it's possible, and definitely my mom has always been this strong woman in my life. She runs a business with my dad, and she always has this mentality that nothing is too difficult. If you really put your mind to it, you can do it, and she always instilled in me to dream big, to not think small, and I recently came across something which I quite like: if you play small, then you win small. So rather play big, and then you can have a chance of winning big.
DR. MALKA	That's a beautiful expression. Besides your mom, who have been some of the other strong women in your life?
DR. SUN	The other one would be my grandmother. So, she also has a strong personality. At that time, she got divorced, but she also worked and made a career for herself, and so seeing working women as an example really gave me an idea: yes, we can do it. We can build a career and have a family; it's doable.
DR. MALKA	And also, just tapping in with your grandmother, and I think that some people won't really appreciate this at the moment because of the era that we live in, but generationally speaking, getting divorced in her era was a major challenge for women.
DR. SUN	Yes, and it was very frowned upon, so it was also very unusual. And then at that time, for her to be, yes, I also want to work because I want to raise my two sons, to actually go out there and start working, I also find that honourable.
DR. MALKA	Yes, so working women, independence, this ability that you can do everything and you can have a full life and having this positive thinking. Now, as we close out today's conversation, can you share a few words of inspiration or motivation for girls and women who are listening to us today?
DR. SUN	So I came across something recently that I really liked and it's very simple, because often you face tough times and you be like, oh, maybe this is just not meant for me, I just want to throw in the towel, but I came across something that said: "A winner is just a loser who tried one more time" and that really stuck to me, so yes, and it's something that, yes, I want to live by and remind myself. The other thing is, don't be afraid to ask; it's okay, because the worst thing that can happen is simply a no, and there would have been a no anyway if you didn't ask. So, be audacious and ask for what you want.

DR. MALKA	Fantastic message. I love all of the little snippets and quotes that you've shared throughout our conversation today; they are really, valuable, and especially this last one.
DR. SUN	Yes.
DR. MALKA	Thank you so much for being on our show today; it's been a pleasure to host you.
DR. SUN	Thank you for having me, and it has been a pleasure being on the show with you.
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