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Jolly good time for a worthy cause

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IT had all the makings of a straight-laced occasion. The invitation had stated the dress code as black tie/dark lounge suit for what was to be the Malaysian Liver Foundation's tribute to its patron - none other than Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

But, as it turned out, it was a relaxed affair, credit going to Datuk Dr Ismail Merican, president of the foundation, and the Prime Minister.

Dr Ismail, the deputy director-general of Health, set the ball rolling in his opening address when, having paid glowing tribute to Dr Mahathir for being the catalyst in the setting up of the foundation, added personal notes.

He said he had had sleepless nights, the heart had sunk and liver shrunk when he was told the Prime Minister could not make the dinner on Aug 13 on account of an official visit to the Ukraine.

But thanks to the intervention of one of the foundation's trustees to whom he affectionately referred as "kakak" (elder sister) or Datuk Paduka Dr Saleha Mohd Ali, the Aug 23 date was made possible and his liver "resumed its normal size".

He spoke also of his friends suggesting he would have an easy win as a candidate in the elections given his recent high media profile during the SARS crisis. Lest he was taken seriously, he was quick to add he was joking.

But if he expected to be let off the hook, he was mistaken. Dr Mahathir took the cue when he spoke, offering him a candidacy provided he could guarantee a win in Kelantan against Pas leader Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

Speaking off the cuff, the Prime Minister started by saying that he was a "disqualified doctor" as he had stopped practice; times and technology had changed and he would be "totally lost" if he goes back to medicine.

But he remembered the moment years ago when he diagnosed his brother-in-law as having liver cancer just by feeling the abdomen. There was nothing he could do then but, today, there was some hope with surgery to remove the tumour.

To the delight of the crowd, he said he had the capacity to bluff his way, "that's how I got here" and on a serious note he spoke of the good the liver foundation could do for people who could ill afford treatment.

He had some advice. "Don't drink but, if you do, eat well." All that broke whatever ice there was.

Generous Malaysians, he was sure, would keep the foundation going. There were 150 tables (ranging from RM5,000 to RM50,000) sold that night at the dinner in Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel.

A cheque presentation saw RM250,000 coming from the dinner host, Tan Sri Dr Jeffrey Cheah of Sunway Group, and three others of RM100,000 each from Yayasan Emkay, Leading Feature Sdn Bhd and Kumpulan Liziz Sdn Bhd.

Before dinner, a video presentation on the Prime Minister with narration by Dr Ismail captured the attention of those present.

It went back to 1994 when the idea for a liver institute was mooted by Mahathir in his office during a courtesy call by two reputable surgeons and Ismail following the opening of the Asia Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver (APASL).

Dr Mahathir had asked when the Ministry of Health was going to set up the liver institute. "Are you going to wait for me to have liver problems

before doing so?"

He was alluding to the National Heart Institute which was set up after he had undergone a coronary by-pass at Kuala Lumpur Hospital.

Nervous though he was at the time, Dr Ismail, then Deputy Director-General of Health, said he was inspired to get cracking. The MLF was registered in 1996 and in 1997 Dr Mahathir officially launched the foundation.

In 2001, the hepatology and hepatobiliary teams moved into the ultra modern Selayang Hospital. It now had the country's first molecular research laboratory for liver diseases and HIV testing.

The foundation was now working with the Health Ministry to set up the Liver Registry and formulate policies for prevention and treatment of liver diseases.

Focusing on the man himself, Dr Ismail said the Prime Minister had enduring qualities. Being an attentive listener during presentations was one he could personally attest to.

The man had a good sense of humour which sometimes couched salient observations that merited serious exploration and he was always exhorting Malaysians to be self-reliant while he himself exuded energy, enthusiasm, resilience and capacity for hard work.

"Dr M is without doubt a leader who knows his way, goes the way and shows the way. And he did all this, his way," said Dr Ismail who later took to the stage to render the song My Way as a special dedication to the man he admired greatly.

All in all it was an evening of good food, entertainment and pleasant company and many an autograph hunter was obligingly accommodated by the Prime Minister at his table.

Local entertainers Sharizan and Wan Nora were joined by Johnny Tillotson on stage. The American singer, 64, sang his favourites, which were also hits in Malaysia in the 60s and showed he had not lost his voice or touch.

This was his seventh appearance in the country he enjoyed visiting and which held surprises every time he did so.

He paid his own tribute to the Prime Minister referring to him as "our Prime Minister" many times.

But, perhaps, his biggest tribute was when he continued singing even at around midnight after most of the people, including the Prime Minister and his entourage, had left.

"I was singing for the liver foundation," said the crooner of such yesteryear hits as Dreamy Eyes, Judy, Judy, It Keeps Right On A Hurtin and Without You.

He had delayed his departure to accommodate the postponed dinner.

"But we didn't mind as we had extra time to see and do things we could not have done otherwise," said Cary Parks, the lead guitarist and musical director who accompanied Tillotson on this trip.

Local back-up singers, keyboardist, base guitarist and drummer provided the musical accompaniment in a performance at a "special charity fee".

Popular TV and radio presenter Gary Thanasan was his usual masterful