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Surgeon with nerves of steel

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JAN 24, 1989, is a day that Tan Sri Dr Yahya Awang will never forget as long as it was an operation that may have altered the history of the nation and the fate of the Prime Minister. The emotions that he felt that morning as he operated on the Prime Minister had certainly a tinge of nervousness, which he admits to having felt, although after all, it was the first time a Malaysian was performing major surgery on the Prime Minister. "I never imagined when I graduated as a cardiothoracic surgeon that I would be performing this operation. The operation may have prolonged the life of the Prime Minister but it certainly was a cause of concern for his father, Tun Dr Awang Hassan, the former Prime Minister. In fact when I mentioned it to them, they were more nervous than me. They asked Dr Yahya had been surprised a few days earlier when informed of Dr Mahathir's surgery. "Being the Prime Minister, he had the option to go anywhere in the world, I suppose. Hussein had undergone heart surgery abroad in 1981 as the expertise and equipment were available. Dr Yahya is clearly his own man in all matters, medical or otherwise. He does not fit the bill of the stereotyped heart surgeon either: he laughs easily but when it comes to his job, he follows procedure to the letter. And so, he monitored Dr Mahathir's case closely, going through the case with the family. The morning of the operation dawned on the Yahya Awang family like any other day. Dr Yahya, then 39, was admittedly on tenterhooks as he prepared to leave for the operating room. "I think the most anxious moment for me was the waiting period but once we started, the man who is known to have nerves of steel the minute he enters the cold steel of his team members, who included eminent surgeon Dr Rozali Wathooth and anaesthetist Dr I suppose they were overawed. But I think as a leader, I had to put things in my own hands. His initial trepidation at being asked to lead in the surgery had been quickly overcome. What was the atmosphere like during the operation which began at 8.30am and ended at 11.30am? "Initially, it was a bit tense but once I proceeded with the surgery, I think the atmosphere relaxed. "I was quietly confident that the surgery will go well because we had studied the case thoroughly. And so it did, with Dr Mahathir being living testimony, at 77 years of age, of the success of the operation. Dr Mahathir's larger-than-life international image aside, it was also probably the most significant testimony of Malaysia's prowess in this particular field, in my opinion. Dr Yahya is still warm with the feeling of contentment that he got from Dr Mahathir's surgery. The former IJN acting chief executive - "I was glad to give it up after a year. "I think being a doctor himself, he must have looked after himself very well. How was the PM, known for his insistence on positive results from any human endeavour? "Very good," he said, adding that Dr Mahathir followed instructions diligently. Dr Yahya is still asked about the operation by people who recognise his name as the former Prime Minister. The fact of the matter becomes clear as the interview draws to an end that he is still a doctor. This is also reflected in his insistence on a short question-and-answer session. And the question that may have been in the minds of Malaysians since the operation was completed. "Well, you can say that I did this because it is a special occasion (a tribute to the Prime Minister). With the interview over, it is back to the grind for the heart surgeon who is

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