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. @ Mohd Khair Mohammad Profile

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Day the PM had a heart attack

IT WAS Jan 17, 1989, our son's birthday. But even though he, Mukhzani, was away in Miri, we decided to celebrate in his absence. In fact, that night all the children were away.

We went to a Thai restaurant in Kuala Lumpur and had such a nice time. Mahathir ate a lot and in the car, he started feeling uneasy.

When we reached home, the pain continued. He took two Panadol but it didn't go away. He was reading a book in bed, as he usually does, when he suddenly put it down. I was putting Ineza (granddaughter by Marina who was away in Singapore) to bed - her cot was in my room - and I asked what's wrong and he said, 'There's a pain here (chest).' I'm very grateful I didn't panic. My old medical training came back, I suppose.

I asked him whether I should call the doctor. Usually, he would say no, never mind-lah, tomorrow, don't disturb (the doctor).

But this time he said yes so I knew he was really in pain. I called a doctor friend, Datuk Dr J.S. Eapen. He asked whether I wanted him to bring this and that and I told him, 'You come, just come.'

So he came, examined Mahathir and arranged for an ECG (electrocardiogram) to be done. I almost went downstairs in my nightie. I just threw on my *baju kurung* and pushed Ineza's cot to another room.

He was admitted at one in the morning (of Jan 18). You know, when I took him in, I didn't realise that I wasn't only bringing in my husband but the Prime Minister.

It was Wednesday morning and there's always a Cabinet meeting on Wednesday. (Datuk) Dr Robaayah Zambahari, the cardiologist, was the first person to attend to him. I didn't know her then; I thought she was a real jumping bean.

When she said it was serious, I asked her whether I should inform (then Deputy Prime Minister Tun) Ghafar Baba and she said yes. So at three o'clock in the morning I called Ghafar.

When Ghafar made the announcement, the whole Cabinet came. The hospital authorities had a meeting with me and told me quite frankly that where medical treatment and nursing were concerned, they could handle it. But there was one thing they needed

In the early morning of Jan 18, 1989, the Prime Minister suffered a heart attack. It was a national crisis that was never openly acknowledged. When it happened, it was carefully handled by the Government with the tacit understanding and support of the media so as not to cause undue panic and worry among the rakyat.

Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali shares with JUNE H.L. WONG the 'most frightening experience' in her life.

my help and that was dealing with visitors.

If they said no visitors, I would have to tell whoever 'no visitors' because they would listen to me more than the doctors, even. So when the Cabinet came, I said no visitors. (Works Minister Datuk Seri) Samy Vellu cried and said, 'Please, I must see him, I must see him.'

So I said if you need to see him, just stand at the door and don't speak and don't cry. Even when Mahathir's sisters came, I told them no crying.

On the first day, the doctors wanted to calm him down and stabilise his condition. They had all these tubes in him which can be quite scary-looking for those not used to it. I'm a doctor but ... for other people, *tak apa*, but this is husband!

I just had to surrender (my husband to the care of others). I knew when I had to move aside and let the doctors and nurses do their work, otherwise I would be hampering them, even though I'm a doctor.

At the same time, you never know; you could be losing your husband at any time and you want to be there, you want to hold his hand.

Dr Robaayah said they had treated him after the heart attack and now that he was more stable, we had to decide the next course of action.

As it turned out, there was an American angiogram specialist who had just

come and left for Taiwan. He was recalled to do the angiogram (where a special dye is injected into the heart to see which arteries are blocked).

When it was decided that Mahathir needed a bypass, the American surgeon came the next day and said: 'It's up to you to decide, here or there (overseas).'

Mahathir then called (Datuk Dr) Yahya Tun Awang, the cardio-thoracic surgeon, and told him, 'I want you to do it'.

But even though he was in the old Kuala Lumpur General Hospital and the facilities were not as good as they are now, I was happy with his decision. By then, Marina had come back and had called all the other children home; two of the boys were studying in the US at that time.

It's a procedure for the cardiac surgeon, cardiologist, the physician, even the physiotherapist to talk to the patient to explain what they're going to do. Then they would brief the family. After Yahya briefed us, I knew the children had hundreds of questions but didn't know where to begin, so I asked for them.

Then Yahya said: 'I know you're under stress. We are too.' It was then I realised that he had said that because this was not an 'ordinary' patient he was handling, this was the Prime Minister. I quickly assured him that we would pray for him and his team.

And there were certainly a lot of prayers. That was certainly the most frightening experience of my life.

(Dr Mahathir's bypass was carried out by a team of specialists comprising Dr Yahya, Dr Rozali Wathooth and anaesthetist Dr S. Radhakrishna. He was discharged from the hospital 18 days after he was admitted.)

IT'S been seven years since his bypass on Jan 24. Mahathir is very conscious of his diet and he takes his routine multivitamins. He eats a lot so I have to remind him to be careful. His favourite food is *daging bakar* (roasted beef) with *kuah assam* (assam gravy) from Kedah. Now the whole of Malaysia knows and they serve him that every time and he has to take a bit.

When he chose Yahya, he wanted to prove a point, that we have good doctors, excellent facilities and nurses. Now we have foreigners coming to the National Heart Institute (of which Dr Mahathir is the patron) for those very reasons.

ous ..." she says with a laugh.

Asked to describe him then, she adds: "He was 22. Skinny. I remember he wore big glasses and had lots of hair, thick hair."

They were in university together until 1953 when he graduated and went to work in Penang.

"We kept to my father's advice that we should finish our studies before getting married.

"I visited Kedah twice before our marriage. My impression of it was that it was very conservative. I was raised in Kuala Lumpur where there were many facilities. Kedah was then very *ulu* (backward). So I was the big-town girl who had to make a lot of adjustments living in a small town."

When the young couple moved north, Dr Siti Hasmah had to adjust to living with her in-laws.

"My husband's family accepted me and made me feel very comfortable. They are wonderful people but because Mahathir is the youngest in the family, I had to take note of that. This was their precious baby I had married!"

A month later, she joined the state government as a medical officer. "That was another adjustment - working life and keeping house."

Life became even more hectic and demanding when the children started coming along.

"I was 30 when I married which was quite old for that time. We were in a hurry to have children so we never spaced (the children) and I never took contraceptives. Marina was born in 1957 when I was 31. Then I had Mirzan, Melinda, Mukhzani and Mukhriz. My youngest was born in 1964 when I was 38. It was only then that I went on contraceptives."

While Dr Siti Hasmah was happy to remain in government service, Dr Mahathir decided to resign in 1957 and go into private practice. It was not for personal

gain but on a matter of principle.

Explains Dr Siti Hasmah: "He wanted to do surgery which meant he had to leave Alor Star and go to Penang (General Hospital) because he had to be a registrar before he could do his FRCS (Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons). But his boss, Mr Thompson, refused to recommend him. He was so fed-up that he quit."

This was the couple's first major crisis.

"I was very upset. Being in government service gave us security and we had nothing. To open a clinic, we needed capital. But he said not to worry because a brother-in-law would help him. So I accepted his decision and helped him with the inventory of medicines."

Dr Mahathir opened his Maha Klinik in Jalan Tunku Ibrahim, Alor Star.

"He was a very good doctor and had lots of patients, regardless of race. I remember one time an Indian driver brought a Chinese woman suffering from an asthmatic

attack to see Mahathir and because she didn't speak Malay or English, they were accompanied by a Malay from the rice milling company," recalls Dr Siti Hasmah.

"He was also very good with his hands, which was why he was interested in surgery. When he was a general practitioner, I would call him to help me with my gynaecological work, when there was a difficult caesarean section to be done."

The growing family enjoyed holidays together and after a few years, Dr Mahathir bought a Pontiac.

"Oh my, it was a huge, blue thing with a special number. We would fill it up and head for Penang."

The island became the family's favourite holiday destination.

"I remember Marina reading the word, 'Shell' during the ferry crossing. She was just three years old."

Marina, being the first-born, was obviously doted upon by her parents.

"Having our first child was a very important event in our lives. Marina was a lovely baby and very good. We called her the burping buffalo. She used to keep us company at breakfast and she would be burping away.

"She was still bald at five or six months and we were scared she might never have hair. Is she my favourite? Well, eldest children are always favourites, aren't they?"

"Even as a child, she was a remarkable person - I'm talking about my own daughter! She would sleep in the car and when she woke up, she would be able to tell us where we were. She had this knack for recog-

nising places. We went to Cameron Highlands in that car and going to KL was an annual affair for Hari Raya."

Against that idyllic family backdrop, however, Dr Mahathir was already im-

mersed in politics and community work.

"Being the only Malay doctor (in Alor Star) who was young and could speak the language, he did a lot of work for the community. He was very busy in charity work and he was the president of the Anti-Tuberculosis Association.

"As for politics, he started very early. He had a big role in the Anti-Malayan Union activities in Kedah before going to university. That was in 1945-46 (when he was already an Umno member).

"He made up posters with his friends in the night - his father helped him buy the materials - and they did all the printing using potato stamps (which they carved themselves) before putting up the posters.

"Later on when we were married, whatever political work he did, it was in Alor Star. During those days, there was no rivalry, no campaigning, nothing. I was a government officer so I didn't go out with him much."

But Dr Siti Hasmah felt comfortable with her husband's growing interest in politics because, as she explains, "after the Malayan Union, the nationalistic feeling was aroused in all of us men and women. So I understood his interest and supported his views and feelings about developing his people and his country."

■ *Tomorrow: The family moves south on the path to national politics*

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