

Dr M's heart attack and the letter for Anwar

Malaysiakini

15 November 2021

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My former colleagues at DJE approached me to work part-time with them on some projects. On a trip with them to Singapore in January 1989, I received an early morning phone call from my husband: Dad had had a heart attack and was in hospital.

I hastily packed my bags, left a note for my boss and rushed to Changi to catch my flight home. My friend who picked me up at Subang airport said she barely recognised me because I looked so haunted. I felt so guilty for being away when it happened.

Arriving at the KL General Hospital, Mum took me to see Dad. I couldn't help but give a gasp of shock at the sight that greeted me. Unused to ever seeing him weak and helpless, I was not prepared to see him lying in bed hooked up to tubes and machines, dependent on the expertise of his doctors. He was only 63 at the time but fairly heavy, and a heart operation, where the heart needs to be stopped

while it is being fixed and then restarted, is always a risk.

His surgeon however was the best we had in Malaysia. Mr Yahya Awang, a tall, distinguished man who also happened to be Hussein Onn's son-in-law, put together a top-notch team of Malaysian cardio-thoracic surgeons, anaesthetists and nurses.

He took care to brief us all on the procedure and when I asked what was the backup plan if anything happened to him before the operation, he smiled gently and said he would be sleeping in the hospital so that he would be rested and ready bright and early before he picked up his scalpel.

Dad too knew about the risks of such a major operation, which had to be done within a week after his attack. On the day before surgery, I happened to be sitting by his bed. He had been awake and strong enough to write a letter that he handed to me. I looked at it and then back at him, puzzled.

'If anything should happen to me, give this to Anwar.'

Anwar Ibrahim was at the time Dad's minister of education and protégé.

'And don't open it!'

I didn't know a piece of paper in an envelope could feel quite as heavy as that letter he gave me that day in 1989. But as fate would have it, I had no reason to open it nor to pass it on to Anwar. Over the years I have kept it safely, even when I moved house, and maybe the day will come when I will get to read it.

Work-related stress

It wasn't so surprising that Dad had a heart attack at the end of the 80s. In the previous years, he had to face many crises, chief among them the challenge to his leadership of Umno in 1987, and the events that led to Operation Lallang. These were the events that had troubled Mum when she was with me in Kobe and which she had felt so bad about leaving Dad.

Even though he did not have the heart attack until two years later, I suppose the build-up in stress was too much for the body to take. He did not have a cholesterol problem, the doctors found, so it must have all been work-related stress. Later, I realised that one of the symptoms of an impending cardiac arrest is a short temper.

There was one day when, for reasons that I no longer recall but which could not have been very important, Dad got very upset with me just after we had tea at home in his sitting room. I was very shocked because it was such a sudden flare-

up, the likes of which I had not seen in a long time and I went home in tears.

I think he too realised after a re-evaluation of his life after the operation that it is not worth getting too uptight about anything. I have not seen him lose his temper since then. In fact, he's often the calmest person in the room whenever there's a crisis, as there were many more to come in the following years.

We were happy that the operation was successful of course, not just for his sake but also for the country. To our relief, it made Dad also re-look at the way he managed stress, understanding that his health depended on it. He began to exercise the discipline that he always tried to instil in us and all who worked for him, by eating properly and sparingly, getting enough exercise and sleep and knowing when to switch off and relax.

Every year he tried to take a holiday with Mum, preferably somewhere remote enough that no 'well-wishers' could just drop in on him. If we could, we joined them because it was a joy to see him not thinking about work but instead laughing and joking with us.

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