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NEWS

Siti Hasmah turns 88

AN INSPIRATION:

She shares her life of beautiful experiences

ZAHARAH OTHMAN
LONDON
news@nst.com.my

"HOW I long to be able to deliver a baby again, watch the head emerging, see the twist of the shoulders and hear the first cry. It is just so wonderful!" recalled Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, who turned 88 yesterday.

In her 88 years, Dr Siti Hasmah has had a long impressive career in the medical profession and an equally impressive "career" as the wife of former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, but when talking about her experience delivering babies and the rewards, her face softened with emotion during an exclusive interview with the *New Sunday Times* before her birthday.

"It is a beautiful experience and whenever I had the chance, I would just go and watch," she said at her office at Petronas Twin Towers.

It is easy to just remember her as the quiet, unassuming spouse of a great man, always smiling and keeping a distance far enough not to interfere but near enough to give support. But Dr Siti Hasmah has had far reaching achievements and is an inspiration to many.

She was among the first few Malay women to study medicine at King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore just after the war, and the first Malay woman doctor to graduate from University of Malaya, which was then in Singapore.

She recalled her early years at the medical school, meeting her icon, Tan Sri Dr Salma Ismail, who was then the first Malay woman doctor to graduate from Singapore.

Dr Salma, who later became her colleague and friend, was the one she looked up to as a source of inspiration.

"In those days, there were only the two of us! Now I am so happy to see so many medical graduates who are women."

"But do not be choosy about where you work. The rural areas need you too."

Indeed it was in the rural areas of Kedah that Dr Siti Hasmah was transferred to when she finished her housemanship in Selangor.

It was also there that she became the first medical officer.

"Kedah accepted me as 'orang Kedah'.

"Kedah taught me what I wanted to know and the rural people taught me what I wanted to be."

She spoke about the challenges with *bomoh*, village midwives, re-



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali says if she hadn't stopped practising in 1979, she would have continued as a lecturer.

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PM sends birthday wishes

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak tweeted birthday wishes to Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and prayed for her good health yesterday.

"Happy birthday, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah! May you be blessed with

good health. Insyaa-Allah."

Dr Siti Hasmah celebrated her 88th birthday yesterday.

Her husband, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, celebrated his 89th birthday on July 10. **Bername**

ligious teachers and comical incidents such as when buffaloes wandered into the hospital and riding pillion on a motorcycle with a Tok Penghulu to visit a kampung.

"I was a *rempit* much earlier. I *rempit* with Mahathir in Singapore and then *rempit* with a Tok Penghulu on his bike going to the kampung," she said, recalling the incident on a narrow lane, which ended with both of them rolling on the ground.

When Universiti Utara Malaysia awarded her an honorary doctorate,

some of the invited old Tok Penghulus nodded in agreement when she spoke about the roaming buffaloes.

"Doctors now shouldn't be choosy. I understand they want rewards, but the rewards will come," she said, remembering a young man who approached her to thank her for saving his life.

"He told me about a woman who was having a threatened miscarriage.

"I had asked her to rest in the hospital until full term. And the baby was born healthy.

"The man thanking me was that baby. And he has become a successful man serving the community. That's one of the rewards you get."

"If I had not stopped practising in 1979, I would continue as a lecturer. But now I keep myself busy with hospital visits."

But how has life as a prime minister's wife compare with being a doctor?

"Well, I tried not to interfere as I didn't know much about politics.

"But I was there to give him (Dr Mahathir) my support because I know his good intentions.

"I would go on campaign trails and just be there with him," she said.

For someone with so much passion for so many things, Dr Siti Hasmah's failing eyesight was a worry to say the least.

"I love reading and I love to play the piano, but I can't do these things now.

"My biggest fear and worry is not being able to see the faces of the people I love. I pray to Allah that it will not get worse."