

# Surgeon with nerves of steel

NST 31/10/2003 - 45, 47 PRECISE

We must cast off the traditional mindframe of 'beggar thy neighbour' and put securely in its place the ethic of 'prosper thy neighbour'.

— At the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting, October 2001.

I am sad that these attacks took place. What also worries me is because of the attacks America will definitely retaliate.

— Speaking a day after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, September 2001.

There's nothing in common between them. To manifest their hatred and to win the votes, both DAP and PAS were prepared to sacrifice their principles.

— On the PAS-DAP "marriage", September 2001

It is not a question of different descent or race. The Malaysians are from one race.

— On the importance of people recognising themselves as Bangsa Malaysia, July 2001.



DR YAHYA: Felt a sense of pride with Dr Mahathir's decision to have his operation done locally in 1989



Tan Sri Dr Yahya Awang, the eminent cardiothoracic surgeon, talks to **BALAN MOSES** about the historic open heart surgery he conducted on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1989.

EURO BOND... YEN BOND O.K...  
JAMES BOND - TAK BOLEH, TAU?

**J**AN 24, 1989, IS A DAY THAT TAN Sri Dr Yahya Awang will never forget as long as he lives. The details of the open heart surgery that began in its early hours are still vivid in his mind despite the passing of time.

It was an operation that may have altered the history of the nation and the fate of its people simply because it was Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad awaiting a new lease of life in the operating theatre.

The emotions that he felt that morning as he operated on the Prime Minister have not been eroded by the lapse of time or the experience of similar operations since.

There was certainly a tinge of nervousness, which he admits to having felt, alongside the routine professional tension before an operation.

After all, it was the first time a Malaysian was performing major surgery on the head of the government of the day.

"I never imagined when I graduated as a cardiothoracic surgeon that I would one day be operating on the Prime Minister of the nation," he said with characteristic frankness in a recent interview, breaking a silence on the surgery that he has maintained since that fateful day.

"The operation may have prolonged the life of the Prime Minister but it certainly shortened mine," said the father of four with equal measure of the light-heartedness which has endeared him to many.

It certainly was a cause of concern for his father, Tun Dr Awang Hassan, the former Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Penang, and his father-in-law and third Prime Minister,

Tun Hussein Onn, both of whom had expressed their fears to him on being told of the operation.

"In fact when I mentioned it to them, they were more nervous than me. They asked me if I was sure I wanted to perform the surgery. I answered that it was my duty. If I had to do it, I had to do it."

Dr Yahya had been surprised a few days earlier when informed of Dr Mahathir's health, more so when told that the Prime Minister wanted to be operated on in Malaysia.

"Being the Prime Minister, he had the option to go anywhere in the world, I suppose, to have medical treatment. Well, for me as a professional, I explained to him the condition, the operation, the risks involved. I was quietly confident that with the team that I had, we could perform that surgery just as well as any other team."

Hussein had undergone heart surgery abroad in 1981 as the expertise and equipment had not been available locally then.

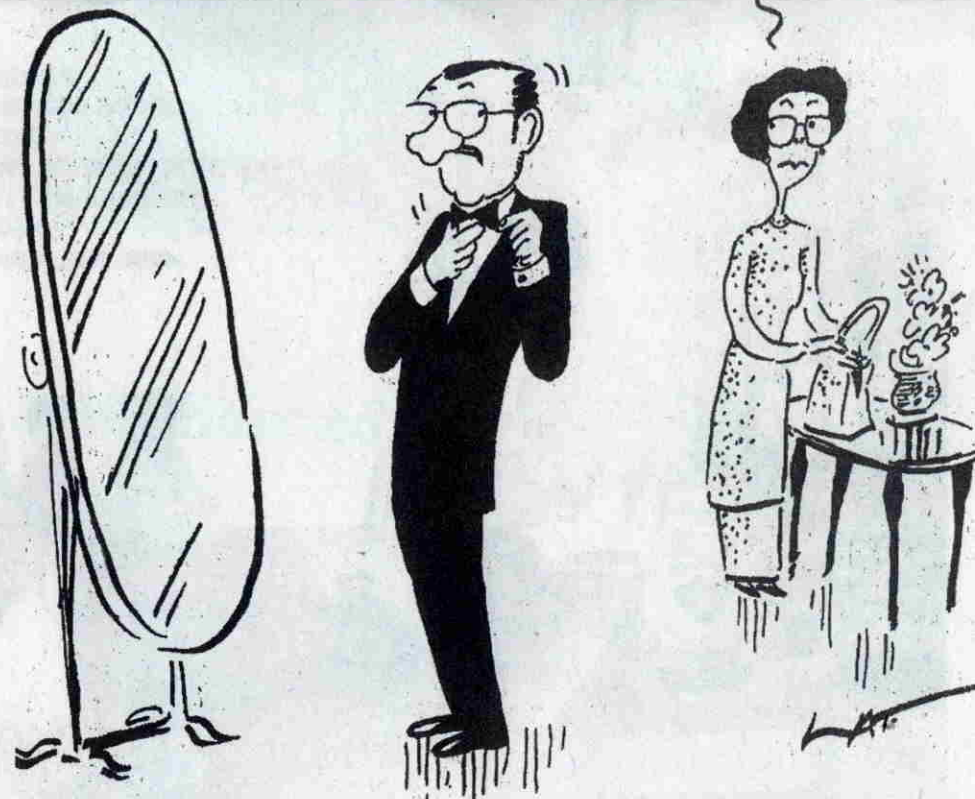
Dr Yahya is clearly his own man in all matters, medical or otherwise.

He does not fit the bill of the stereotyped heart surgeon either: he laughs easily, has an affable disposition and talks to everyone, patients included, like an old friend.

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 a fine toothcomb until he was satisfied with preparations.

The morning of the operation dawned on the Yahya Awang family like any other day with probably just two exceptions: Dr



Yahya awoke earlier than usual while his wife, Dr Suraiya (head of the skin department at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital), said a special prayer for him in her usual intercession.

Dr Yahya, then 39, was admittedly on tenterhooks as he prepared to leave for the (then) Kuala Lumpur General Hospital to carry out what would probably be the single most important operation in his

lifetime.

"I think the most anxious moment for me was the waiting period but once we started the surgery, our minds were on the operation and that element of anxiety was eliminated," the head of Institute Jantung Negara's Cardio-Thoracic Unit said.

But the man who is known to have nerves

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## PM stable after heart bypass surgery

**KUALA LUMPUR, Tues.** — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad successfully underwent a coronary bypass operation at the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital this morning.

The doctors had decided to carry out the operation based on the results of the most recent medical tests, hospital director Datuk Dr C. Fonseka said in a statement released to *Bernama*.

The operating team consisted of cardiac surgeons Yahya Awang and Rozali Wathooth and chief anaesthetist Datuk

Dr S. Radha Krishnan.

They were assisted by a team of doctors, nurses, medical assistants and technicians.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's condition is

■ CORONARY BYPASS: WHY IS IT NECESSARY?: PAGE 2

stable and is being monitored closely, the statement said.

The Prime Minister was admitted to the hospital about 1am on Wednesday after complaining of chest pains.

He is the second Malaysian Prime Minister after Tun Hussein Onn to have undergone this operation during office.

Tun Hussein underwent the operation in London in February 1981 and resigned in May 1981. He had another successful heart operation in 1987 in San Francisco.

A member of the operating team today, Dr Yahya, is the son of the Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Penang, Tun Dr Awang Hassan. He is a son-in-law of Tun Hussein, having married Dr Surayah Hani Hussein, a skin specialist, in 1977.



DR MAHATHIR

FLASHBACK: Our report after the operation

# Dr M's faith in local doctors

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What if he changed his mind and said 'no'? So, how could I say anything?

— Explaining why he could not provide anyone with answers prior to Tun Daim Zainuddin's resignation as Finance Minister, June 2001.

How do you expect us to have more faith in your currency than you yourself?

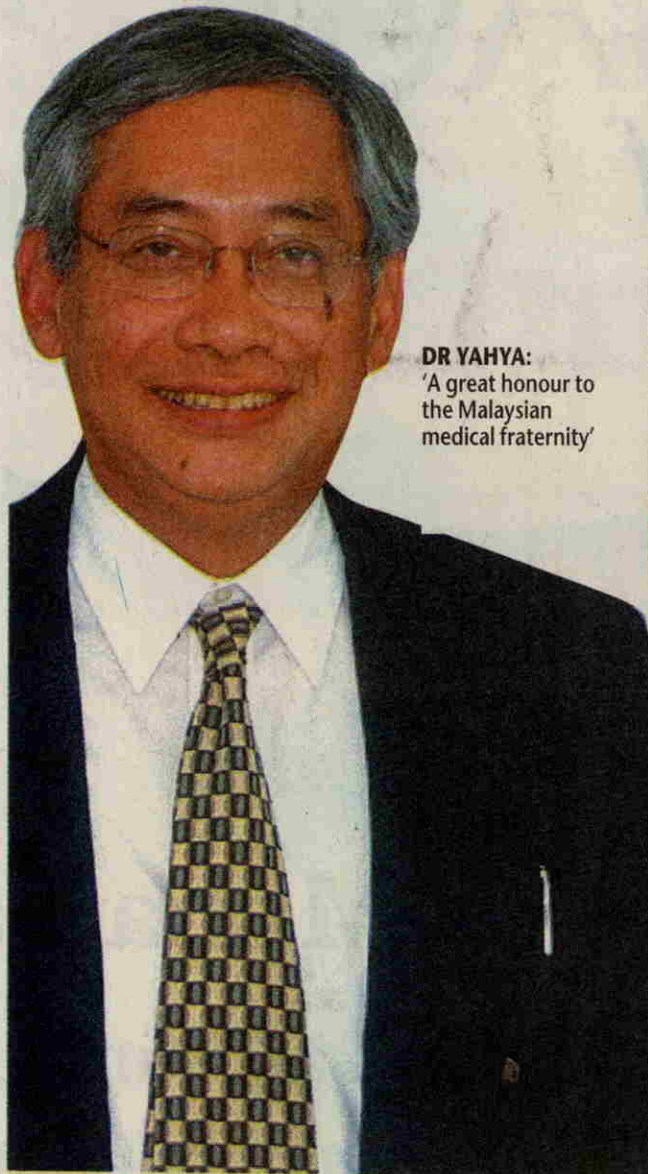
— On European companies that often refused to deal with anything else other than the greenback, December 2001.

Well if they think they want to go they can go, the Government is not stopping them but we're not backing them ... I think they will be wasting their time.

— On PAS' call for its members to go for jihad in Afghanistan, October 2001.

Are we going to accept globalisation without question, a globalisation conceived and interpreted by the rich countries, which is manifestly in their interest?

— On globalisation, September 2001.



DR YAHYA: 'A great honour to the Malaysian medical fraternity'



I'M ALL RIGHT: Dr Mahathir on his way home after being warded for 11 days at the National Heart Institute for a lung infection in April, 1999

■ FROM PAGE 45

of steel the minute he enters the cold and colourless environment of the operation theatre knew he had to be a pillar of calm for his team members.

Were his team members, who included eminent surgeon Dr Rozali Wathooth and anaesthetist Datuk Dr S. Radha Krishnan (both of whom he had personally requested to work with him) and senior operation theatre staff overawed by the identity of the distinguished patient before them?

"I suppose they were overawed. But I think as a leader, I had to put things in proper perspective. I think if the leader remains calm and objective, the others will follow suit," he said.

His initial trepidation at being asked to lead in the surgery had been quickly overcome by his practical nature which told him that it was just another surgery like the hundreds that he had performed before.

What was the atmosphere like during the operation which began at 8.30am and ended at 2pm?

"Initially, it was a bit tense but once I proceeded with the surgery, I think a sense of calm took hold, and as we moved on, the operation proceeded well," he said, explaining that he could not divulge certain details of the operation because of doctor-patient confidentiality.

"I was quietly confident that the surgery will go well because we had studied the case well and we had done so many before. So there was no undue nervousness or worry or interference and I was very confident that everything would end well."

And so it did, with Dr Mahathir being living testimony, at 77 years of age, of the success of the operation which understandably made headlines the world over.

Dr Mahathir's larger-than-life international image aside, it was also probably the first time that such a complicated surgery had been performed in a nation which many in developed countries may have thought incapable of.

"The operation was testimony of Malaysia's prowess in this particular field, if not for medicine in general. I think it gave a lot of confidence to the medical fraternity, particularly the cardiothoracic fraternity. It just showed that

we Malaysians can do what others can do just as well."

Dr Yahya is still warm with the feeling of contentment that he got from Dr Mahathir's decision not to go abroad for the operation as "it was a great honour to the Malaysian medical fraternity".

The former IJN acting chief executive — "I was glad to give it up after a year" — is happy with the state of the Prime Minister's health today which he attributes to the fact that Dr Mahathir is a disciplinarian.

"I think being a doctor himself, he must have looked after himself very well. He leads a healthy lifestyle and the doctors at IJN see him regularly. As far as I have been informed, his heart is still functioning well."

How was the PM, known for his insistence on positive results from any human endeavour, as a patient?

"Very good," he said, adding that Dr Mahathir followed instructions diligently "and that's why he recovered fast."

Dr Yahya is still asked about the operation by people who recognise his name and is, quite frankly, embarrassed by the attention he gets.

The fact of the matter becomes clear as the interview draws to an end that he just wants to get the job done without undue fuss.

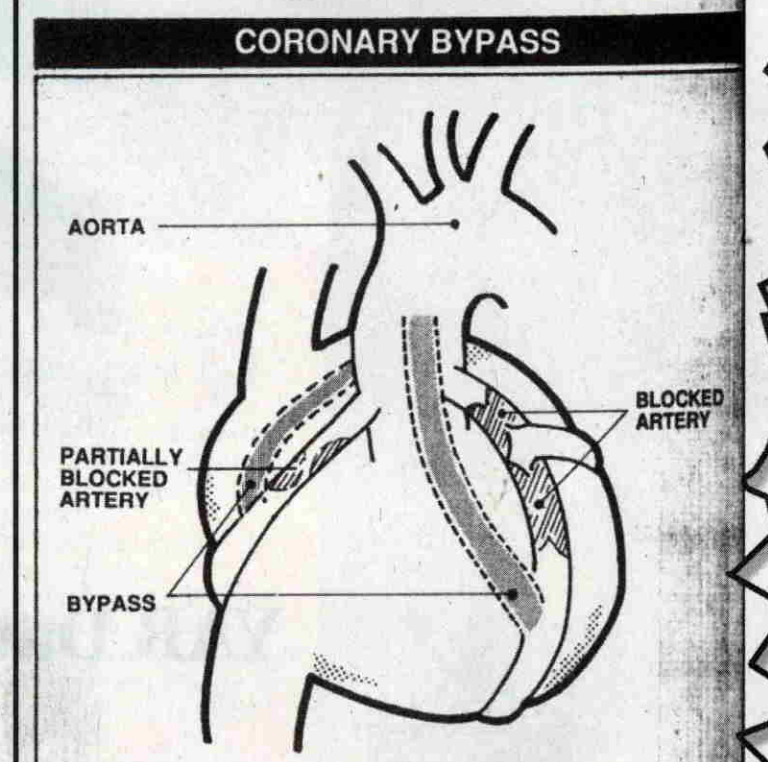
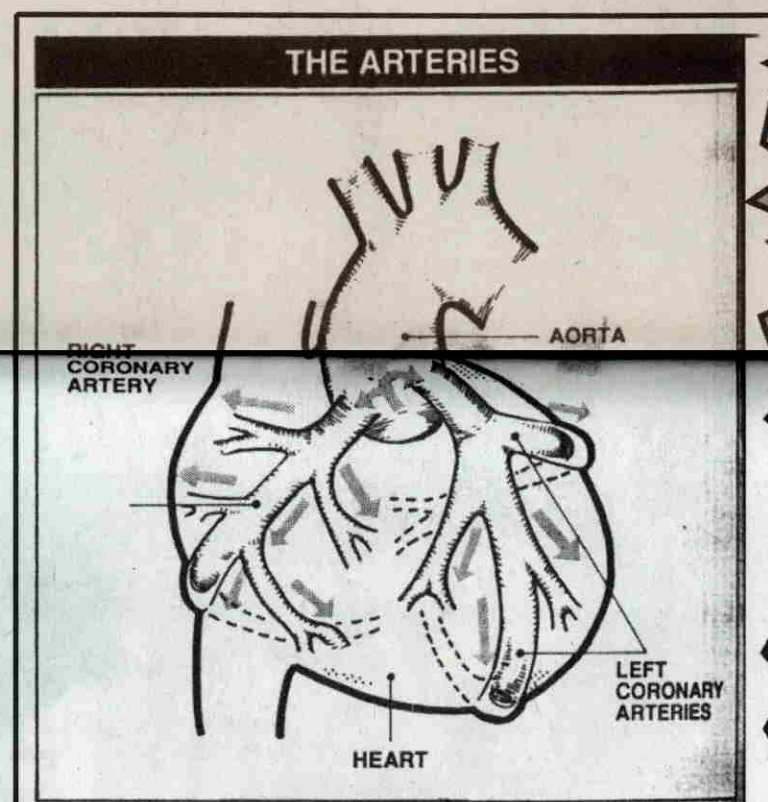
This is also reflected in his insistence on a short question-and-answer session and the frequent time checks that he conducted during the 45-minute interview.

And the question that may have been in the minds of Malaysians since the operation — why has he finally chosen to speak about the surgery after refusing hordes of journalists for the better part of his career?

"Well, you can say that I did this because it is a special occasion (a tribute to Dr Mahathir as he leaves office after 22 years) but I won't do it for others," he said, adding that "I am generally a shy person."

With the interview over, it is back to the grind for the heart surgeon who is just at home wearing blue in the operating theatre four times a week as he is with the familiar surroundings of his Taman Duta home.

■ The writer is News Editor (IV) at the NST.



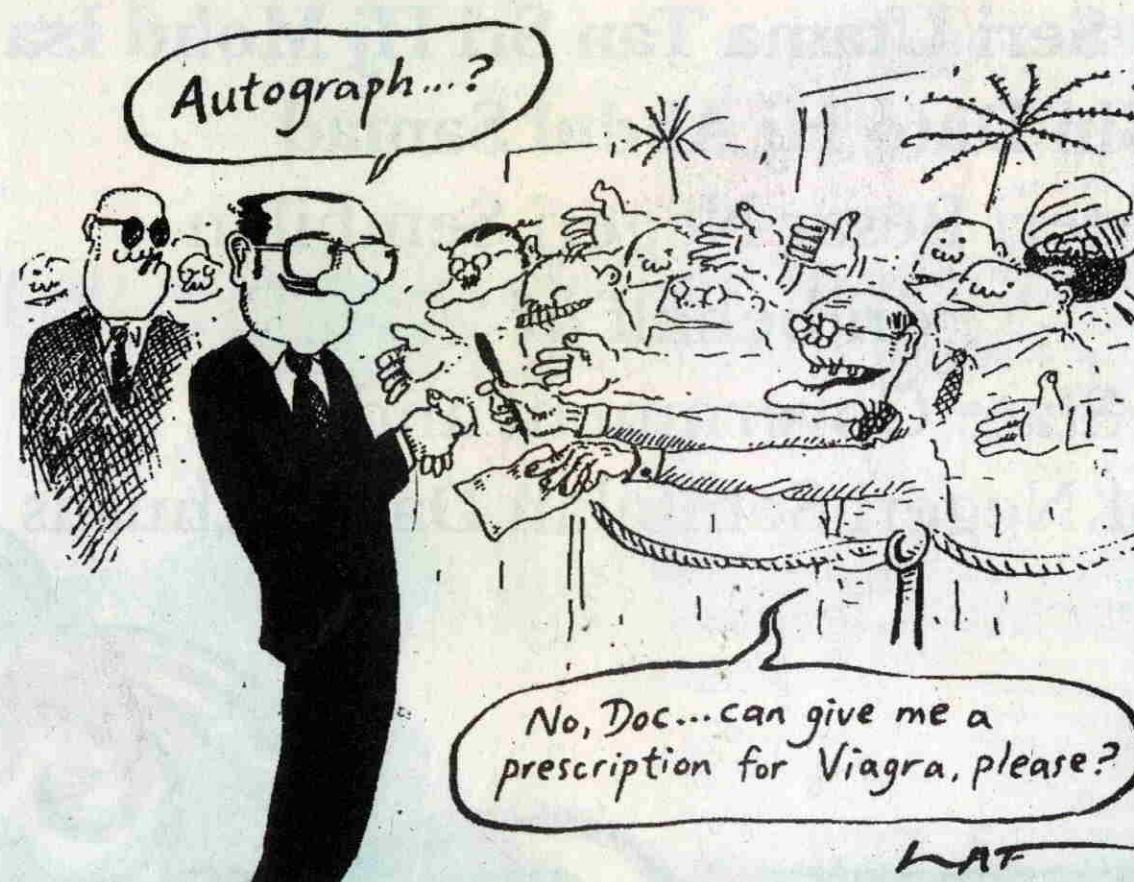
## When a bypass operation is required

A CORONARY bypass operation is necessary when one of the vessels supplying blood to the heart muscle is partially blocked.

When this happens, the oxygen supply to a part of the heart reduces and the blockage causes heart pains (angina pectoria) especially in times of exertion like exercise, excitement or fear.

In most cases, such blockage is a result of growing old although in certain cases, it is due to heredity.

Scientists have no doubt that the disorder is due to the advanced lifestyle and dietary habits with smoking as a major factor. Other factors include a sedentary existence, overweight and rest-



FLASHBACK The report after the operation