

LIFE AT THE CUTTING EDGE

With MBRF now welcoming nominations for this year's Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Award, Flashes looks at the career of one of last year's winners – internationally renowned heart transplant surgeon Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub, founder of The Magdi Yacoub Heart Foundation and Chain of Hope.

It was 31 years ago that doctors sat Steve Syer down and told him that without a heart transplant he could be a mere 12 hours from death. That while transplant surgery was, and remains, a terrifying prospect, the alternative was far more fearsome. He would not live to see his children grow up.

The picture ended up being very different though. Now 72, Steve didn't just watch his own kids fly the nest. As a result of his then quite pioneering surgery, he's also gone on to hold six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, and has been instrumental in raising more than Dhs5.7 million for his local branch of the British Heart Foundation in Cheltenham, England. All experiences which, he says, are thanks to one man – Egyptian cardiothoracic surgeon Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub.

"I said to the nurse, 'How will I know it is him?'" Steve says of waiting for surgery, and his surgeon, all those years ago. "The nurse said, 'You will just know, he

has a presence about him'. And it was absolutely true. As soon as he stuck his head round the door we knew."

Describing his surgeon as "very humble", Steve says: "People would approach him at charity events and things like that and say, 'Thank you for what you've done for me'. And he would say, 'That is no problem, I am only doing my job'.

"He always seemed to know exactly who you were and what had been done to you, without having to look at any notes. And he was very approachable – you could ring his office and speak to him if you needed to."

Knighted for services to medicine and surgery in 1991, Sir Yacoub is seen as a pioneer in the field of transplant surgery, and was not only the first British Heart Foundation Professor of Cardiothoracic Surgery, he also remains the surgeon who has carried out the most transplant surgeries in the world.

A skilled researcher, the 83-year-old is also credited with creating a number of cutting-edge procedures, ▶





Above: Sir Yacoub and fellow Knowledge Award winners at last year's Knowledge Summit in Dubai

and has used his time in the theatre to explore new methods of treating and preventing cardiovascular disease before transplant surgery is needed.

"I had an innate desire to know new things, to perfect what we were doing, to evaluate new forms of treatment and to study and improve surgical techniques," he says of his decision to branch out into research as well as surgery.

"We were swamped, and we couldn't cope with what was going on, but we also found that cardiac surgery provided material for studying the basic elements of cardiovascular disease. We saw that we could prevent disease as well as treat it, and if we put ourselves out of a job, great – really, you felt if you could do that, you could go and grow oranges and be very happy."

Not content with conducting both life-saving surgeries and research, in 2008, Sir Yacoub set up the Magdi Yacoub Heart Foundation (MYF) – an Egyptian registered NGO – with the aim of establishing a medical centre of excellence and international standing dedicated to cardiovascular surgery, treatment and research. Based entirely on donations, MYF set up the Aswan Heart Centre and the Aswan Heart Research Centre, both of which were cited for their excellence at last year's Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Awards, where Sir Yacoub was one of the award's recipients.



Right: Sir Yacoub is also the founder of Chain of Hope, a UK-based charity that oversees his work to establish self-sufficient heart treatment centres across the world

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PROFESSOR SIR MAGDI YACOUB,
FOUNDER OF THE MAGDI YACOUB HEART FOUNDATION AND CHAIN OF HOPE



Above: Queen Elizabeth II receives Sir Yacoub during an audience at Buckingham Palace, London, where he was presented with an Insignia of a Member of the Order of Merit in 2014

Sir Yacoub is also the founder of Chain of Hope, a UK-based charity that oversees his work to establish self-sufficient heart treatment centres across the world. “When I finished my training, I used to go out to Egypt with colleagues I met during my training and help them treat children with heart conditions,” he says of its creation. “Heart surgery was just starting then but it was not available across the world. Then we went to South America and to Africa as a group of two or three. We realised we needed a sustainable organisation, which will survive me, and so I established Chain of Hope UK.

“We have networks now, we know almost everybody around the world. That’s what Chain of Hope does – around the world including the countries that need it. We work with them to create a sustainable service. In Aswan, Egypt, for example, the unit performs all types of operations on small babies, newborns, the switch operation, by local staff, day and night, free of charge.”

It’s quite a career history and one would easily forgive Sir Yacoub if he were now to be found growing those oranges, having stepped back from the operating table in favour of a relaxing retirement. But, ever-ambitious, Sir Yacoub says that’s not for him.

Speaking to the British Heart Foundation, he revealed: “I don’t want to slow down because it’s a way of life, it’s something I enjoy.

“I have children and grandchildren and if you asked me who my favourite child is, I would say I love them all. I feel the same about my research. So is it operations for children with congenital heart disease? Yes,

HONOURS AND AWARDS

1988: Bradshaw Lecture, Royal College of Physicians

1998 Texas Heart Institute Ray C. Fish Award for Scientific Achievement in Cardiovascular Disease

1999 Lifetime outstanding achievement award in recognition of contribution to medicine, Secretary of State for Health (UK)

2001 The Cleveland Clinic Foundation Heart Failure Summit : Kaufman Awardee

2003 Golden Hippocrates International Award for Excellence in Cardiac Surgery (Moscow)

2004 International Society for Heart & Lung Transplantation Lifetime Achievement Award

2006 European Society of Cardiology Gold Medal

2007 *Daily Mirror* Pride of Britain Lifetime Achievement Award

2007 Honorary citizenships of the city of Bergamo, Italy

2007 Medal of Merit, President, International Academy of Cardiovascular Sciences

2011 Order of the Nile for science and humanity

2012 American College of Cardiology Legend of Cardiovascular Medicine

2015 Lister Medal for contributions to surgical science

2018 Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Award

of course. Is it new methods in transplantation and immunosuppressants, seeing people survive longer? Of course. Is it tissue engineering and the regenerative therapy? Of course. But it’s all related and to pick one of them and say, “This is my favourite”, I am not going to do it.

“I do feel tired a lot but I enjoy what I do and I cannot sit on a beach for half an hour without thinking about something – I really get bored. I don’t want to slow down because it’s a way of life, it’s something I enjoy thoroughly and I wake up at 3am thinking about writing a grant to the EU or reading the latest issue of *Nature*. I am not suffering.” †