

# Legacy of grit and innovation

From childhood lessons in discipline to pioneering advancements in nephrology, this man's remarkable journey exemplifies the essence of perseverance and visionary leadership, writes **Tan Bok Hooi**

**A**T the tender age of 8, while enjoying a holiday in Batu Pahat, Johor, a little boy faced a dilemma that would leave a lasting imprint on his life. Engrossed in carefree play, he only remembered his homework at the last moment.

Anxious, he turned to his father, who responded calmly and gave him a simple but firm suggestion: start the homework immediately. By bedtime, he had only made partial progress, but his father's unwavering insistence on prioritising responsibilities over leisure made an indelible mark.

The following day, discovering that many of his peers had not completed their assignments, the little boy felt a quiet sense of pride in his achievement and time management became a cornerstone of Tan Sri Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman's character, shaping his approach to work and life with a relentless commitment to diligence and excellence.

He fondly recalls the long, contemplative walks he shared with his father during his medical student days. As the Malaysian High Commissioner in Canberra, his father was not only a diplomat but also a source of invaluable guidance.

Those walks became moments of profound father-son bonding, during which his father imparted a crucial lesson: success should be earned through one's own efforts, not through the privilege of family connections.

This advice resonated deeply with him, shaping his path as he returned to Johor Baru to practice medicine. Despite being the nephew of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, the deputy prime minister, he chose to forge his own path, driven by the principles of hard work and self-reliance instilled in him by his father.

## TWIST OF FATE

The recipient of the 2024 Merdeka Award for Health, Science and Technology, Johorian Dr Abu Bakar, born on Feb 4, 1944, was the first fully trained nephrologist to work in the Health Ministry. Initially passionate about cardiology, a sudden twist of fate and the looming prospect of a transfer to Kuala Terengganu, if he pursued cardiology, led him to pivot to nephrology.

Upon returning from his overseas training, he plunged into his work with unwavering commitment. Despite his father's earlier suggestion to enter private practice and his uncle, Dr Ismail, offering him the opportunity to take over his private clinic, Dr Abu Bakar chose to make his mark in the public sector.

Driven by a deep sense of purpose and a commitment to public service, he focused all his efforts on address-



At the 2024 Merdeka Award Night. Tan Sri Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman (centre) with his wife, Sukanya Tangtatsawas (second from right), and children and son-in-law.

ing a critical shortage of dialysis centres across Malaysia. This shortage left countless patients in precarious situations with slim chances of survival.

Navigating this challenge was fraught with obstacles, including significant funding issues. Undeterred, Dr Abu Bakar actively engaged in forums and interviews, tirelessly advocating for the expansion of dialysis services.

His youth sometimes meant that his proposals were not taken as seriously as they deserved. Yet, he remained steadfast in his pursuit of a breakthrough, recognising that while many supported his vision, others remained skeptical.

His perseverance bore fruit when BAKTI, under the leadership of Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, took a keen

interest in his mission. BAKTI's initial funding was pivotal in launching the project.

Tasked with devising a detailed proposal for the funds, Dr Abu Bakar outlined a plan to establish dialysis centres in six states. He meticulously visited each state to assess manpower and training needs, confronting the reality of inadequate facilities — one site had only a roof, while another was a repurposed car garage within a hospital compound.

Undeterred, he instructed his team of nurses and medical assistants to make the best of whatever spaces were available, demonstrating a pragmatic and resilient approach to overcoming the challenges they faced.

In the 1990s, Dr Abu Bakar introduced an innovative self-care model

for dialysis patients, allowing them to manage their treatment with guidance provided via phone calls when necessary.

This approach was designed to alleviate the strain caused by the acute shortage of medical staff and expand the reach of dialysis services. As dialysis centres sprang up across the country, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) played a crucial role in establishing their own facilities. The Muar-born Dr Abu Bakar's initiative to train NGO staff facilitated the rapid growth of these centres.

With more organisations joining the effort, dialysis facilities proliferated at an accelerated pace. Throughout this process, he remained focused on finding solutions and driving progress, determined not to be hindered by the

challenges that arose.

Receiving the Merdeka Award is a surprising honour for Dr Abu Bakar, especially since he had stepped away from government service over 23 years ago, after his tenure as the eighth director-general of health from 1991 to 1999.

Yet, the award fills him with pride and deep satisfaction. He's quick to acknowledge that this achievement is certainly not his alone; it has been the result of the unwavering support and efforts of his team — colleagues, nurses and medical staff — along with the crucial initial funding provided by BAKTI. Their collective contributions have been instrumental in realising his vision and making a lasting impact on Malaysian healthcare.

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**OF BOND AND KINSHIP**

Dr Abu Bakar's father, Datuk Suleiman Abdul Rahman and Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj became close friends when they studied together for the Bar in London during their student days. His grandfather, Datuk Haji Abdul Rahman Mohd Yassin, was the first Yang DiPertua Dewan Negara (Senate) and also formed the integral team of Orang Tujoh Muar which vehemently opposed the proposed formation of Malayan Union in the mid-1940s.

The close bond between Tunku Abdul Rahman's family and Suleiman's family became especially evident when the young Dr Abu Bakar decided to marry Sukanya Tangtawas, a Thai lady he had met during his studies.

Recognising the intricacies of Thai customs surrounding marriage, his mother deemed Tunku Abdul Rahman the ideal person to offer guidance. At the time, it was customary for someone outside the family to formally request the future bride's hand in marriage.

Upon agreeing to assist, Tunku Abdul Rahman was delighted and immediately set about helping. He wrote a personal letter to Sukanya's father, a respected bank general manager in Thailand.

Coincidentally, a Thai minister was visiting Penang, and Tunku Abdul Rahman took the opportunity to enlist him as a personal envoy to deliver the letter. The sight of a high-ranking official presenting the letter at the bank's office left everyone astonished and highlighted the extraordinary lengths Tunku Abdul Rahman went to facilitate this important request.

**ELECTION TRAIL**

Dr Abu Bakar and his brother, Abdul Rahim, were exposed to the political atmosphere during their childhood when their father decided to contest in the local council election as an independent.

With a campaign symbol of a bell, Abu Bakar and his siblings would accompany their father on the election trail. Often, their campaign stops were ingeniously timed during movie intermissions or even in the midst of a boxing match. Such unexpected



Book launch of the writer's 'A Man and his Wallet and other stories' at IMU University in 2016. Tan is standing fifth from left, and on his left is Dr Abu Bakar.

# A lasting legacy



Installation of Dr Abu Bakar as chancellor of IMU University on Aug 27, 2024.

interruptions drew the crowd's ire, but they were invaluable opportunities for the candidates to make their voices heard.

In the 1955 General Election, when their father ran against Datuk Onn Jaafar, the young Abu Bakar, one of three siblings, cheekily inquired of his step-grandmother whether she would vote for Datuk Onn or his father. Given that the former's elder sister was their grandfather's wife, this playful question earned him a scolding and a label of being a "naughty boy".

**LEADERSHIP AND CHARACTER**

Reflecting on his early days as a hospital administrator in Pontian, Dr Abu Bakar recognises how those experiences shaped his leadership and character. He took a hands-on approach, conducting surprise checks in the kitchen and X-ray department. Discovering a shortage of X-ray protective shields, he promptly requested additional supplies from Johor Baru.

Pontian's diverse population,

comprising Bugis, Javanese and other ethnic groups, spoke languages unfamiliar to him. This linguistic challenge underscored the need for interpreters, a gap he needed to address in his quest to provide effective healthcare.

One of the most unusual incidents Dr Abu Bakar encountered involved a young man who came to the hospital with a broken leg following a heated altercation. Intrigued by the case, he was soon faced with another patient — an individual who had been beaten up and was receiving treatment in the emergency room.

Determined to get to the bottom of the situation, the young doctor promptly contacted the *ketua kampung* (village head) for more information. Through this inquiry, he learnt that the conflict had erupted after a

Bugis man had engaged in flirtatious behaviour with a Javanese woman. Offended, the Javanese man retaliated by confronting the Bugis man, leading to the violent encounter and a series of events that brought the two men into the hospital's care.

In another memorable case, Dr Abu Bakar treated a woman who arrived at the hospital holding her crying baby and suffering from severe diarrhoea. As night fell, her husband arrived, insisting on taking them home despite the medical advice.

The young doctor promptly contacted the *ketua kampung* for assistance. The *ketua kampung* quickly arrived, assessed the situation and persuaded the woman's husband to let them remain in the hospital.

He assured the husband that he would take care of their other chil-

dren by arranging for neighbours to look after them. True to his word, the *ketua kampung* returned later and successfully convinced the husband to allow his wife and baby to stay for the necessary treatment. Although initially aggressive, the husband ultimately agreed, relieved by the arrangements made for his other children.

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

His dogged determination to get things done and his stubbornness to continue fighting even against all odds are truly exemplary. However, Dr Abu Bakar insists that he would not have been able to achieve so much without his loving wife's support.

He would send his children to classes and she would pick them up after school. When he was working on weekends, she would be the one to send them to tuition and music classes. On weekends, they would enjoy brisk walks around Taman Tasik Titiwangsa before he left for his ward rounds and returning later to take them home.

Today, as the chancellor of IMU University (formerly International Medical University), Dr Abu Bakar exemplifies how unyielding passion and steadfast determination can drive one to achieve extraordinary success and make a significant impact in the world.

His remarkable journey shows that one can indeed transform challenges into groundbreaking advancements and leave a lasting legacy.

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Birthday party for his grandson, celebrated with the family.