

# LIFELONG LEARNING: AN ACADEMIC AT HEART

Fusing passion and scientific interest led Prof Aziz to unexpected success

ALWAYS focused and steadfast in his passion to pursue a career in clinical medicine, International Medical University (IMU) vice-chancellor and chief executive officer Prof Abdul Aziz Baba has come a long way from a young and compassionate doctor to the position he holds now in Malaysia's first private medical and health sciences university.

Growing up in the early years of Independence, he was raised with the idea of being in service of others where he soon found that his personal values jived with his scientific interests, setting him on a path filled with unanticipated opportunities.

He began his clinical career in the 1980s as a medical officer in Penang, where his interest in specialising – now a qualified haematologist and oncologist – took root after losing his cousin to leukaemia.

With this experience sustaining him throughout his training, Prof Aziz eventually accepted a post at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) at its then-new campus in Kubang Keriang, Kelantan.

"Prior to this, all the public universities were located in urban centres and the location of this campus raised some eyebrows.

"However, in retrospect, I think it was a good experience for me to serve in an underserved community that previously had very little in terms of medical services," he said.

As one of the pioneers on campus, Prof Aziz found his hands full, helping to develop the curriculum for undergraduates and then post-graduate students on top of seeing patients.

His specialist training also made him the right man for the job of setting up the oncology and haema-



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tology departments and services, as well as the stem cell transplant services for patients who required transplantation.

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"It has been enriching and gratifying to train future doctors," he said.

After some 20 years at USM and armed with a firmly established career as well as professional reputation, it was time for him to retire if it were not for a call from IMU, where he had previously visited as a guest speaker.

"What attracted me to IMU was the unstinting quest for excellence that I saw in (IMU co-founder) Dr Mei Ling Young and (then-president) Tan Sri Datuk Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman, and their values.

"In fact, I felt that Dr Young epitomised IMU in many ways and that their leadership had shaped IMU as a values-driven institution. Ultimately, this greatly impressed me and when they made an offer, I

was interested to see where this path would lead," said Prof Aziz.

With the bulk of his career spent in a public university, Prof Aziz looked upon this offer as a fresh challenge and an opportunity to experience a new learning environment.

However, the transition from a public-funded institution to a private one was a bumpy road at first.

"It was a steep learning curve for me to learn how IMU needs to be a business as well as a university, so having to develop a business sense was an added dimension," he said.

"I have always believed that education is a universal right, and after so many years at USM, people who had known me for many years had concerns that this might change my views.

"However, throughout my time here at IMU, I have found that the academic imperative is not lost here at IMU. Our reputation is predicated on quality and our students are recognised as being among the best-trained," he said.

Prof Aziz soon succeeded Dr Abu

Bakar as vice-chancellor at IMU and president of IMU Health, with the responsibility of managing the strategic direction of the university.

Under his leadership, IMU achieved a six-star Setara\* and five-star QS\*\* rating, and is now one of the only local private universities in Malaysia with self-accreditation status, an indication that regulators have great confidence in the university's internal quality management.

Today, his main challenge lies in anticipating the future of healthcare – moving beyond quality assurance to add value – to ensure students are well-prepared.

"The entire healthcare environment is undergoing rapid change. We are now seeing a shift in healthcare, moving from treatment to preventative care and from hospital-based care to clinic, home and self-care.

"We are also increasingly seeing technology as an enabler and the importance of data in improving care. As a university and as a faculty, we must be able to be agile and

continue to respond to these changes, especially in the area of digital healthcare" he said.

However, in spite of all these technological advancements, Prof Aziz cautions that the human element is still essential.

"It's about you as a person. We all need to have soft skills like problem-solving and empathy, which are all the more important in an environment that is dominated by technology and AI.

"This is why we need to develop holistic individuals and we are privileged to have IMU alumni to inspire us in this area, because they are not just using their training to do well for themselves, but also doing good for others," said Prof Aziz.

Looking back, having come full-circle from his childhood desire to provide care for others, this seasoned academician is still up to the challenge and keenly aware that he still has much to offer.

He sums up his legacy eloquently by saying "We have done well, and IMU is a leader in many areas, but the best is yet to come."

\* Setara is an evaluation system to measure the quality assurance and standards of Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia based on the autonomy, quality and performance of the institution. Its rating is based on institutional excellence through three main functions: teaching and learning; research and innovation; and services.

\*\* QS World University Rankings are based upon academic reputation, employer reputation and research impact.