You are reading this article for free.
Enjoy unlimited articles for just £1 a month.

View offer

Heart surgeon Magdi Yacoub at 90: ‘There is a lot more I need to do’

The man behind 30,000 operations talks about his friendship with Princess Diana, his plans for a hospital in Rwanda and being called a ‘mad surgeon’



Sir Magdi Yacoub

JOHN ANGERSON FOR THE TIMES

Mark Souster

Friday October 16 2026, 9.16pm, The Times

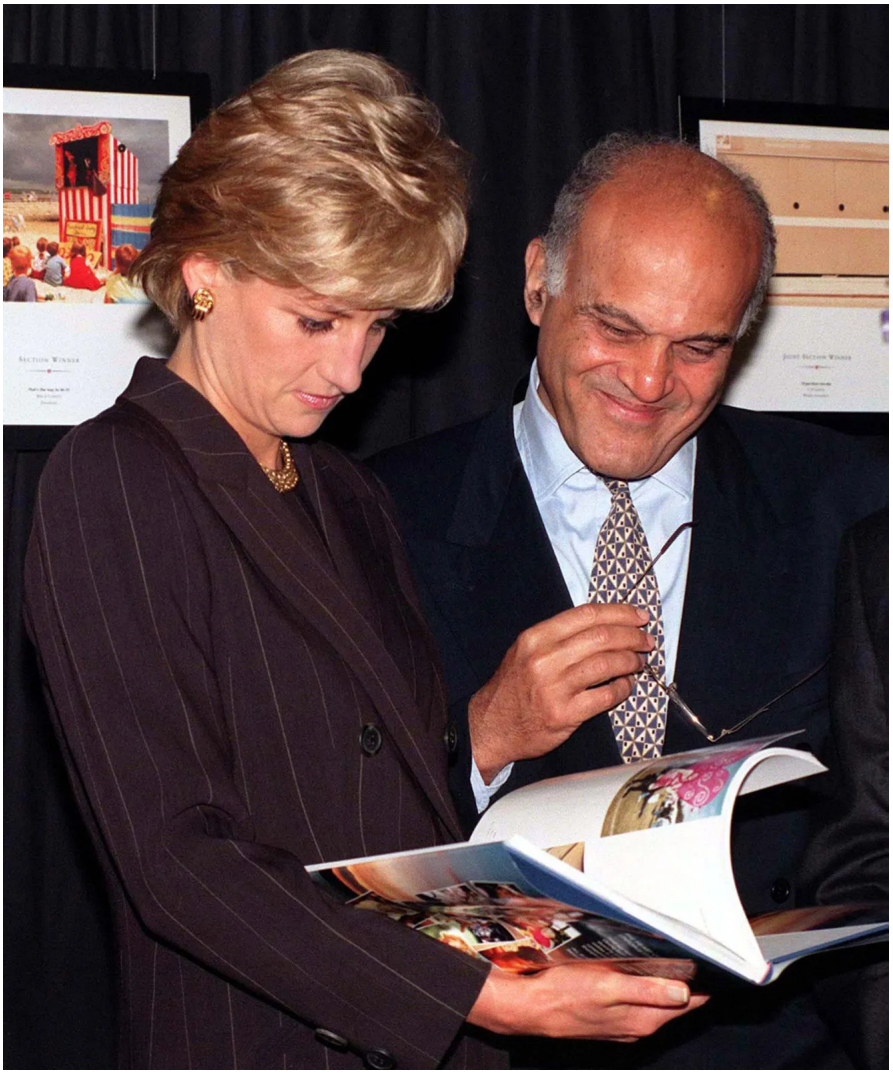
Listen • 11:01 min Share

Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub is sitting at a table in his office, his inner sanctum at Harefield Hospital in London. Its walls and windowsills are lined with awards, citations and photographs from his extraordinary career.

Princess Diana was once a regular visitor, offering comfort and compassion to his most sick patients.

“She identified with the underdog and wanted to alleviate suffering,” he reflects. “She used to come to my office, sometimes sobbing, saying nobody listened to her and that the media just focused on her earrings. She wanted to use the media to help people.”

As does Yacoub. Today the pioneering heart surgeon is poring over his architect’s plans for his latest mission, a cardiology hospital in Kigali, Rwanda, which is due to open next summer. At the age of 90, he shows no signs of slowing down, such is his desire to continue to play his part in combating cardiovascular disease, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, ranked as having one of the worst rates of the condition by the World Health Organisation.



Yacoub and Princess Diana at the Royal Brompton Hospital in 1996

ANWAR HUSSEIN/GETTY IMAGES

“I don’t believe in immortality, but life expectancy has doubled in the last century,” he says. “Some people say, if you’re 90, why do you want energy to run around? Of course you want to live a life which is complete! There is a lot more to do, a lot more I need to do.”

Regrettably, one thing he can no longer do is drive his beloved sports cars — his Lamborghini was a favourite — and after a hip replacement three

years ago he now requires a walking frame. This does not stop him pacing 8,000 steps a day — much to the chagrin of his daughter Lisa — but the decades spent stooping over patients while performing an estimated 30,000 heart procedures, with Bach and Beethoven playing in the background, have taken a physical toll. “I have destroyed my back!” he says. He once stood at just over 6ft — now he’s barely 5ft 10in.

ADVERTISEMENT

Yacoub last operated about a decade ago but still scrubs in the operating theatre with his team in Egypt to oversee and teach the new operations they are working on together.

Top stories

1 **Caitlin Moran: People hate me, my hair, my face, my feminism**
Life

2 **Tony Hadley: Fans still threw their knickers on stage after I became a dad**
Parenting

3 The beauty expert's all-time favourite hair products

Beauty

4 The ten companies fund managers think will make them billions

Saving & Investing

5 'Mum is dating a fraudster. What can I do?'

Family Finances

The focus now is on research at the Magdi Yacoub Institute in the labs below his office where he continues to drive forward the search for novel treatments and techniques. Scientists there are trying to grow living heart valves and organs from a synthetic scaffold that attracts the body's own stem cells. They are also exploring the potential for gene editing to combat cardiac failure.

"People listen to me now much more than they did before, so I have a lot more responsibility. I love research. My memory for recent events is not good, but my memory for scientific papers published 40 years ago is crystal clear."

This proves very useful for the young people he works with, who in turn supply "massive energy and ideas. I challenge them, they challenge me, and that keeps me young."

Then there is the development of a chain of non-

profit hospitals that are free at the point of delivery, which already includes Cairo and Aswan in Yacoub's native Egypt, and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. A direct connection from Harefield links Yacoub to hundreds if not thousands of doctors and surgeons around the world who trained under him.

ADVERTISEMENT

So, to Kigali. The Rwanda-Egypt Heart Centre is a cardiac teaching hospital, which — as well as being a 60-bed hospital delivering specialised cardiac care — aims to become a regional hub for biomedical research, innovation and education. Its mission is to train and empower a new generation of Rwandan medical specialists.

- **The 'holy grail' of heart health: a valve that grows inside you**

He says: "We wanted to reproduce exactly the same model as Aswan: independent, autonomous, run by a charity, treating people regardless of money, colour, creed or religion, and relying on donations. We are applying the same policy, investing in young, enthusiastic people rather

than those who say, ‘I know it all.’

“The dream I have is that all of these hospitals can act as a model. If people adopt that model, then we conquer the enemy, which is ignorance and disease.”

The Rwandan and Egyptian governments are among those that have supported the $27m project, and the architect Julia Backhaus provided her services pro bono for several years (her daughter received what she calls “platinum-standard heart care” at Great Ormond Street Hospital two days after her birth).

ADVERTISEMENT

But there is an immediate need to raise $3.5m for construction work on the critical care unit. “It is not easy to find money, and the hope is people reading this might feel they will be able to help us,” he says.



Yacoub with the architect Julia Backhaus

JOHN ANGERSON FOR THE TIMES

To Yacoub, advances in medicine are possible only by taking risks, and for the most part he has been vindicated. He has been responsible for many firsts: one of the first switch operations to save babies born with their aorta and pulmonary artery the wrong way round; Europe's first heart and lung transplant in 1983; the world's first "domino" heart transplant (in which the patient receiving a heart and lung transplant donated their healthy heart to another) in 1987; the first living lobe transplant for a cystic fibrosis patient in the UK in

1995; and developing innovative operations for many complex congenital heart anomalies.

“They used to call me the controversial doctor who has no ethics, experimenting on patients and doing transplantation,” he recalls. Some went further, such as Kenneth Clarke, who branded Yacoub the “mad surgeon at Harefield”.

From being an outsider regarded as a maverick — a term Yacoub loves because it identifies him as an independent free thinker — he is now at the very heart of the establishment.

“I got accepted and given almost every accolade in this country. I most appreciate the Royal Society, because people used to say doctors are not scientists, but now I’ve been admitted by the pure scientists.

ADVERTISEMENT

“The other one is the Order of Merit. The Queen, whom I really loved and respected, chooses only 24 people for it, and she chose me [in 2014]. I thought, ‘My God, who am I to sit with all these guys?’



Yacoub receiving the Order of Merit from Queen Elizabeth

GARETH FULLER WPA/GETTY IMAGES

“When you get the Order of Merit, there are no fanfares; you went to meet the Queen one-to-one for two hours.”

Is there one pioneering element of his work that he is most proud of? “No. They are all like my children; I am proud of them all in different ways.”



Yacoub, at Harefield Hospital with two of his young patients and their mothers in 1986

CHRIS BALL FOR THE TIMES

One child is especially important: Haile, who is Lisa Yacoub's adopted son. "We found him in Addis Ababa when he was 11, but he looked about seven because he was emaciated. He was living alone in a hospital emergency room on oxygen, and they said there was no treatment for him, and he was going to die.

"We took him to Aswan and operated on him. He was frightened because he couldn't speak English

and had a perforated eardrum. A guardian brought him to London, where Lisa acted as his foster mother. He was in severe heart failure, but now he runs faster than anybody and plays tennis. He arrived in the UK unable to read or write. And he is now a medical student. We are so proud of him."

ADVERTISEMENT

As for Diana, Yacoub's admiration is evident. "She was an incredible person. I would go on my midnight rounds and hear giggles, and I knew exactly what that meant. She'd be in the ward talking to the children.

"I would say to her, 'What are you doing? It's midnight. Do you have security?' 'No, I drove myself.'

"'Oh, my goodness,' I'd say. 'Will you be safe?' She said, 'It's OK — I'll ring you when I get home!' And she did.

"Once, she asked me who my sickest, most miserable patient was. I introduced her to Victoria, a teenager from Northern Ireland who

had a transplant at age seven. Diana came alone in the middle of the night — no bodyguards. I heard her giggling in the room.

“She painted Victoria’s nails a different colour every week. At Christmas, Diana asked Victoria what she wanted, and Victoria said she wanted to meet Prince William. Diana promised to bring him, but later apologised saying he was too shy to come. Diana told me she had said to William, ‘If you’re going to be a king, you must feel the pain of the people.’ That has always stuck in my mind.”

Magdi Habib Yacoub — curriculum vitae

- **Born:** November 16, 1935, in Bilbeis, Egypt
- **Education:** Cairo University’s medical school
- **Career:** Worked at Harefield Hospital from 1969 to 2001 as a consultant cardiothoracic surgeon, where he performed the UK’s first combined heart and lung transplant in 1983, and established the largest heart and lung transplantation programme in the world. He was consultant cardiothoracic surgeon at the Royal Brompton Hospital from 1986 to 2001. He has developed novel operations for several complex congenital heart anomalies. He was knighted for

services to medicine and surgery in 1992, appointed to the Order of Merit in 2014 and received the lifetime achievement award from the British Heart Foundation this year. He is emeritus professor of cardiothoracic surgery at Imperial College London, and founder and director of research at Harefield Hospital's Magdi Yacoub Institute.

- **Family:** A widower. He has three grown-up children, Andrew, Lisa and Sophie.

He mourns Jeffrey Archer, who died recently. "Jeffrey and his wife, Mary — who is a very special person — helped tremendously. We wouldn't have these heart centres without him. Over 15 years he helped us raise millions of pounds at our annual gala dinners."

Despite his best efforts to throw off the heroic mantle, Yacoub is internationally revered, nowhere more so than in the land of his birth, where a mural in the Nile Delta province of Sharqia immortalises Egypt's two favourite, albeit contrasting, sons, Yacoub and the footballing great Mohamed Salah.

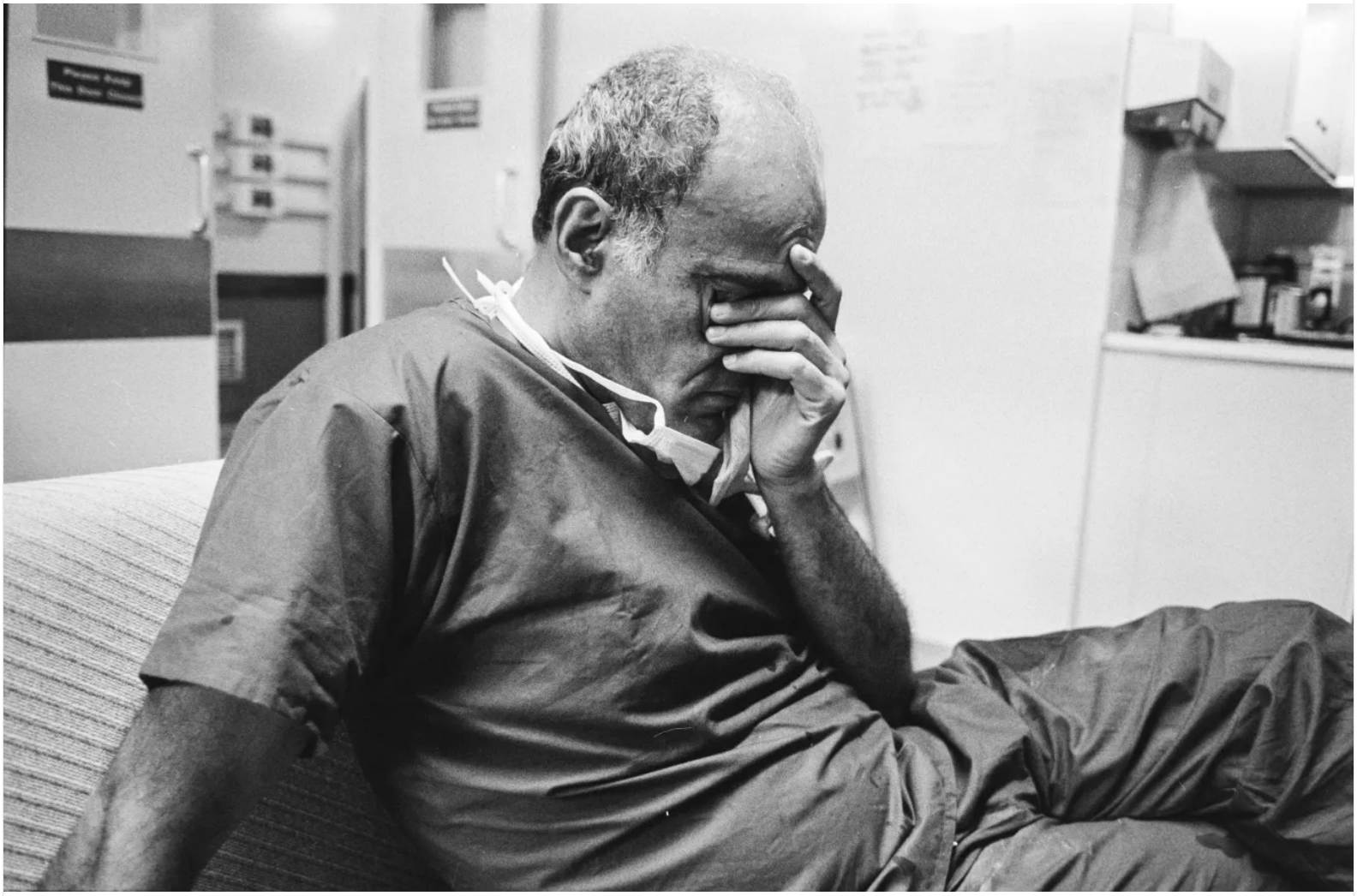


AMR ABDALLAH DALSH/REUTERS

“I always say that people think of surgeons as heroes. We’re not at all. We are applying what is, in effect, a very noble profession, to the community. And the community thinks that we’re fantastic. We are just the vehicle. I really believe I am just an ordinary doctor trying to do his job to the best of his ability.”

At his peak, Yacoub’s prodigious work rate left his Harefield team trailing exhausted in his wake. He

often undertook 16 operations a week, working late into or even through the night, rewarded only by a takeaway tandoori chicken curry and a few hours' snatched sleep before returning to his desk and further research.



Yacoub after an operation in 1989

ROS DRINKWATER

He has rubbed shoulders with the rich and the famous, and on occasion even saved their lives, among them the comedian Eric Morecambe (heart bypass), the Egyptian actor Omar Sharif (triple heart bypass) and the former Greek prime

minister Andreas Papandreou (aortic valve surgery).

There is one code by which he lives: PPH — passion, persistence and humility.

He says: “I always tell my students to keep humble. You must have passion because you have to love what you’re doing. You need persistence because people will keep saying you’ll never make it. And humility is essential. You can talk to kings and queens, but you must look after the desolate and the poor who have nothing. In science, humility is vital because when you make a discovery, you might think you’re at the top, but the real top is somewhere else. You have to keep going.”

So finally, how would he like to be remembered? “Somebody who loved his fellow man and had an impact on society, the poor and the desolate.”

For information or to donate visit: rwandaheartcentre.org

Princess Diana Rwanda

Share