Sir Magdi was born in Egypt. His father was a surgeon there and worked in many places in Egypt and thus from an early age Magdi was exposed to different cultures. He wanted to be a heart or brain surgeon from the age of 14, but his father told him that he should do something else. His resolve to become a heart surgeon was strengthened by the death of his father’s sister at age 22 in childbirth. She had a narrowing of the heart mitral valve which, even then, was surgically correctable.

He studied medicine and surgery at the University of Cairo but was aware that if he was to achieve his goal he needed to work with some of the best surgeons and he further developed his skills in London and Chicago. Christian Barnard did the first heart transplant in Cape Town in 1967 and this excited Magdi.

In 1969 he returned from Chicago to set up his own show at Harefield Hospital. He identified very much with the concept of the NHS and established transplant, paediatric and other types of heart surgery.

In 1973, a moratorium on heart transplant surgery was called because the results were less than optimum. Sir Magdi believed that this was a good thing because it made people try harder to find better anti-rejection drugs and procedures.

Sir Magdi’s pioneering approach has occasionally caused a public outcry.

He once connected a 13 month old child with multiple organ failure to a sedated baboon, which in turn had been cooled and infused with human blood before being re-warmed. The baboon’s heart pumping blood through the child allowed the organs to recover, although both the child and baboon ultimately died. On another occasion a baby born with virtually no brain was kept alive to be the donor for a baby with a defective heart. Such situations illustrate the challenges that Sir Magdi has faced.

Today heart transplantation has a 90% success rate at 1 year post-surgery and a 65% 5 year success rate. Derrick Morris, who was Sir Magdi’s third transplant patient in 1980, died in 2005, six months after his 25th anniversary. John McCafferty who had his transplant in 1982 is still alive.

During those pioneering years, Sir Magdi was often seen on morning television coming out of a small plane or helicopter with an ice-box containing the donor organs. It seemed that all his operations took place throughout the night. The operations took place whilst classical music was played in the theatre to stop people talking and maintain focus.

Sir Magdi has done over 2000 heart transplant operations but he is also famous for perfecting the Ross procedure in which he corrects the congenital heart defect in which two major blood vessels were connected to the heart the wrong way.
He did the so-called domino operation in which a patient with failing lungs received heart and lungs from a donor, whilst another patient received the good heart from the first patient. This perhaps illustrates the greatest limitation of transplant surgery – the availability of suitable donors.

Sir Magdi has constantly had to think outside the box to solve clinical dilemmas. Thus, for a patient with cystic fibrosis – a genetic disorder affecting sodium pumping in which the lungs fill with mucus – he considered two living donors each providing a lobe of lung. This brought in question operating on fit individuals and facing the possibility that a fit donor might die during or as a result of the operation. Using 3 operating theatres over 12h, Magdi conducted such an operation and produced a remarkable effect in the cystic fibrosis patient only for the patient to die, many days later, from an infection.

Sir Magdi was forced to retire as an NHS surgeon at the age of 65 in 2001. However, Sir Magdi still had great plans. He founded the Magdi Yacoub Institute at Harefield Hospital overseeing the work of 69 scientists and students addressing issues such as tissue engineering to grow replacement valves and organs from stem cells, transplant, and immunology to allow the use of other species in transplant programmes.

Sir Magdi has a very active interest in both the NHS and global healthcare delivery. He was appointed an ambassador to the NHS to recruit overseas specialists. He is Founder and President of the Chain of Hope Charity treating children with correctable cardiac conditions from developing and war-torn countries and also training local doctors in such operations. In his spare time – goodness knows how he finds it – he grows orchids.

Magdi Yacoub was knighted in 1992. He received a life-time achievement award from the Secretary of State for Health in 1999, the Order of the Nile in 2011 and many other awards. In 2014, he was made one of only 24 holders of the Order of Merit bestowed by the Queen for exceptional service. However, for a person who tries to keep a low profile, perhaps the esteem he has in the public eye was shown by beating Sir Paul McCartney and Sir Richard Branson in BBC radio one people award.

Most worthy Chancellor and the whole University, I present to you this man whom I know to be suitable as much by character as by learning to proceed to the degree of Doctor of Medicine, honoris causa, for which I pledge my faith to you and to the whole University.

Professor Mike Cawthorne
March 2015