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CRUISING KYUSHU

THE STONE GARDEN OF RYOANJI

古老时尚的当代银座



 Japan. Thank You.



INTERVIEW Maya Nishihata
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A GOOD HEART

Dr. Hisayoshi Suma



Dr. Hisayoshi Suma is Japan's most renowned heart surgeon. Described as having "the hands of God," the 62-year-old specialist performed the world's first coronary bypass using gastric arteries—a refined technique that has since become standard. He has also developed a number of other surgical innovations that have saved countless lives.

When did you realize you wanted to be a doctor?

When I was in middle school, I had a dream in which I was wearing a green surgical gown. From that day on, I knew I wanted to become a surgeon. I often spent time alone with my thoughts as a child. My parents divorced when I was young, and I grew up hardly knowing my father. That made me determined to lead a happy life, and I started thinking about what would make me happy. At the time, Japan was going through a period of rapid economic growth, and there

was pressure to be the kind of person who pushes others out of the way to get to the top. But I didn't believe that would make anyone happy. Instead, I thought about doing a job that would be of service to people, because I thought that you could only become really happy by making others happy. Also, at the time, there was a popular American television series called *Ben Casey* that featured a surgeon. I started to think that becoming a doctor might be the job that fitted my ideals, and it was around that time that I had the dream.



While still in your 30s, you developed a technique in which gastric arteries are connected to the heart.

In the 1980s, heart surgeons around the world began investigating a new technique to treat blocked arteries. Their idea was to connect one of the chest arteries to the heart as a replacement. But we needed another suitable conduit to bypass more coronary arteries. Then I had the idea that we should use an artery from the abdomen—the gastric artery.

I was helped in this by the roundabout career route I had taken. After graduating from medical school, I entered general surgery because I wanted to gain an overall understanding of the internal organs as a basis for specializing in heart surgery. But that meant that I fell way behind my colleagues who went straight into heart surgery. I regretted it and thought I had made a mistake. Yet during my time as a general surgeon I performed many stomach operations. Learning to understand the stomach inspired me to think outside the box when I began doing cardiovascular surgery.

Another great achievement of yours had to do with the heart muscle.

Cardiomyopathy is a disease in which the muscles of the heart become necrotic and inelastic, and the heart becomes incapable of the contractions required to send blood to all parts of the body. To help treat this disease, a Brazilian surgeon named Randas Batista developed an innovative cardiac surgical procedure that involved removing the necrotic area, which allowed the remaining heart muscle to resume contractile action. However, there were inexplicable discrepancies in the postoperative survival rate, which I was uncomfortable with. Then, one day, it occurred to me that the necrotic tissue might actually be a patchwork of healthy tissue and necrotic tissue. Using preoperative testing and

manipulation during surgery, I developed a method of isolating the necrotic area and removing it, which dramatically improved the survival rate.

How do you get the inspiration for new surgical techniques like this?

Well, not by sitting at a desk looking at a medical textbook! I have sudden flashes of inspiration—for instance, when I'm cooking or listening to Eric Clapton play guitar. People don't arrive at a brilliant idea simply by thinking and thinking, right? Not that the time you spend thinking is wasted; rather, your reasoning evolves little by little in a spiral path, and then one day you come up with an idea that you didn't expect. Besides the two techniques you mentioned, I have also devised a range of other surgical procedures and surgical tools, and the ideas for all these came to me at unexpected moments.

I hear that your operations are very fast.

Actually, people who come to observe me are surprised and often say, "You certainly take your time!" I perform each action slowly—stitching and cutting and so on—but the reason the operation is over quickly is that I visualize it dozens of times beforehand until I can see the whole procedure very clearly, like a film. The positioning of my wrist, the angle of the needle, how to bring out a blood vessel if it's hidden under fatty tissue—one by one, I consider all the things that could possibly happen and the hundreds of options. Because I have anticipated 90 percent of the process, I can decide calmly and without hesitation which technique to use in any situation that comes up. That's why I'm fast. I do this visualization whenever I have a moment—in the bath or on the train, and sometimes I lose track of my surroundings and ride right past my station.

What do you think about during the operation, when you are like a guardian standing at the gate between life and death?

I am in conversation with the patient's heart. I take a heart that is barely moving and on the verge of expiring, put it in my hand, and say, "You're safe now, I am going to make you better." When the operation is finally done and the heart has started to beat steadily, I feel as if it is thanking me. At the start of the operation, I pray to God, "Please save this patient." I don't believe in any specific religion, but I am convinced of the existence of an invisible force that helps people.

First of all, the patient is entrusting their life to me, and, of course, that's an amazing thing. So on the day before the operation, I make sure to pat the patient on the back and say, "Don't worry." They always tell me later, "That was the thing that touched me most." There are people who say that I have "the hands of God," but I think it's all these things together that go into the success of an operation. It's not just a surgeon's skill with the scalpel, but also his strength of mind that helps bring out a resilient spirit and physical strength in the patient—and that naturally creates strong powers of concentration in the surgical team.

In 2010, you began publishing installments of an autobiographical novel. What made you want to write?

I am often invited to speak at universities, and when I talk about my life, the students react in all kinds of ways. They tell me "You've broadened my outlook" or "Being indecisive isn't a bad thing after all." In the book, I describe the period of trial and error from my mid-40s into my 50s, leading up to when I introduced the Batista operation in Japan and developed other new surgical techniques, alongside descriptions of my life with my wife, pet dogs and friends. I believe that truthfully relating the life of one man in this way will help younger generations to pick up life lessons that relate to their individual perspectives. That's why I write.

What do you do to take a break from your busy schedule?

I love cooking. I cook all kinds of food—Japanese, French or whatever. But because I have lived in Rome [while working at Gemelli General Hospital, part of the Roman Catholic University of Vatican City], I probably cook Italian the most. I can even fillet fish. It's much easier than an operation, because you just cut and don't have to sew it up again afterward!

What are your plans for the future?

I opened my own clinic in April. In addition to doing consultation and surgery for heart disease, I am also tackling a completely new field: regenerative medicine using cell transplantation. I turned 62 this year. Until recently, my constant thought has been, "This will set a new surgical standard" and I have been intent on creating new techniques. But now, I've become passionate about regenerative therapy, which has progressed dramatically in recent years. Where does this

excitement come from? It's not from anything as insignificant as the wish to achieve renown by developing new therapies. Being able to save more lives, seeing more people lead happy lives—the thought of being able to do that is what excites me. So, at 62, I don't think I've changed at all since my younger days. I feel I'm still chasing the same dream.

Hisayoshi Suma studied medicine at Osaka Medical College and began his career as a doctor in Tokyo in 1974. In the early 1980s, he trained as a heart surgeon at the University of Utah; after returning to Japan, he performed the world's first gastroepiploic artery bypass. Suma's other achievements include establishing Japan's first dedicated cardiac surgery clinic, the Hayama Heart Center, in 2000. He has been supervisor of the Cardiovascular Institute since 2005 and, earlier this year, he founded the Suma Heart Clinic in Tokyo.

