

A Man with a PLAN



“Do I look like a man with a plan?”

The slender young man with the radiant smile is mimicking a line from the villainous Joker in the second Batman movie.

At first glance, the answer to his mischievous question is, “Yes.” The youngest of six children in a hardworking Indonesian family, Panji Hadisoemarto, now 33, earned a medical degree before embarking on a public health research and teaching career that has taken him from his hometown of Bandung to Boston, where he is currently a doctoral student at Harvard School of Public Health.

But appearances can be deceiving. In fact, this seamless list of accomplishments began as a Plan B. Medical school was a distant second choice for Hadisoemarto when he failed to get into a top informatics program to prepare for a career creating computer games, the passion of his teen years. Two older siblings already owned the pricey medical textbooks, and he didn’t really see another option. “My dad always told us, ‘You don’t have any choice but to pass the college entrance exam. If you don’t, I will just buy you a pair of goats.’ I didn’t want to be a goatherd—not that there’s anything bad about it.”

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In the Coachella Valley, Ruiz plans to work with the public health and medical communities to boost the number of doctors serving the area. Already, he's collaborating with the University of California, Riverside, School of Medicine on residency programs that encourage students from disadvantaged parts of the valley to return and serve there as doctors. He has also launched a mentorship program for pre-med students who want to work in the valley.

CONGRESS RESEMBLES THE ER

Ruiz expects that working in Congress will resemble working in an emergency room, with its urgent and sometimes conflicting demands. In a sense, he plans to treat constituents as patients. "I will always put people before politics," he says. He likens policy development to a medical work-up, explaining that both require a diagnosis, an evidence-based treatment plan and—what lawmakers often overlook—a measurement of the outcome.

His path through the worlds of public health, medicine and now politics seems as clear to Ruiz as his mother's formative advice on good nutrition. "This is a dream come true for me: to incorporate the best public health school in our country into the farmworker trailer parks and in the poorest areas of our district, where I grew up," he says.

"I feel comfortable working in the barrios of the eastern Coachella Valley. I feel comfortable in the jungles of Chiapas or Port-au-Prince in Haiti. I feel comfortable in the halls of Congress. It's just a matter of being true to my values and understanding that we're all fundamentally humans, made up of the same fabric of life."

Daniel Lovering is a Cambridge-based journalist who has reported on public health issues and other subjects from nearly a dozen countries.

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Soon, however, his ambivalence faded, and he found himself engrossed in his medical studies, especially classes in public health, where he quickly saw the potential for vastly expanding his impact. "With medicine, you're most likely doing good just one person at a time. With public health, you have the opportunity to do good for many people at a time."

BIRD FLU TO BREAKBONE FEVER

Shortly after completing his medical degree, Hadisoemarto landed a plum job with a U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit in Jakarta, embarking on an exhilarating if often unnerving stint on the front lines of Indonesian public health. He was on the ground in a disaster area the week after the 2004 tsunami that killed more than 200,000 people, helping with an epidemiologic assessment for his office. The following year, he found himself in the historic position of collecting the sample of what turned out to be Indonesia's first-ever human case of avian flu (H5N1). Alone in his office one day, he was called out on a two-hour road trip to take a nasal swab from a patient with a mysterious illness—an experience he describes as "very, very exciting and a little bit scary."

This was also when Hadisoemarto's interests coalesced around infectious-disease epidemiology, including dengue fever, now the focus of his dissertation. A mosquito-borne virus, dengue has been spreading rapidly since World War II and is now endemic in half the world's nations. "The mosquito is very smart," Hadisoemarto notes. "Controlling them is difficult, as if they were created to adapt to whatever we do. Perhaps, as one of my Indonesian professors says, 'The world was created for insects.'"

While some 80 percent of those infected with dengue show either no or very mild symptoms, in a small portion of cases, the disease can be life-threatening and extremely painful, earning it the moniker "breakbone fever"—as Hadisoemarto knows firsthand from his own two bouts with the disease, the first quite serious. "I was hospitalized for a week, and I felt very, very weak for a month after that," he recalls.

Two years into his research job, Hadisoemarto got an offer he couldn't

refuse: an invitation to teach at his Indonesian alma mater. He had grown increasingly uneasy with the aura of political intrigue that surrounded the Navy lab—to his mind, a reflection of larger tensions between Islamic countries and the U.S. And he had fallen in love with teaching classical guitar.

THRIVING IN THE LEAST DEVELOPED PLACE

Hadisoemarto quickly took to the academic environment. After a Fulbright Scholarship and an MPH at Georgia State, he applied to the HSPH doctoral program in Global Health and Population, drawn by the focus on world health issues. (In the meantime, he also married and had a child.)

Today, he is using mathematical modeling to explore how a dengue vaccine—now in Phase III clinical trials and widely predicted to be available in the next decade—could be deployed most economically and effectively in Indonesia. Looking ahead, he envisions using similar methods to fight other infections, including, perhaps, HIV/AIDS.

Hadisoemarto's vision for his own future is even more expansive. On returning to Indonesia, he plans to let his public health career take him where the need is greatest in a country that is moving forward (universal health insurance is slated to begin in 2014) but still suffers from "a double burden of disease": deadly infections such as dengue, malaria and TB, alongside the cardiovascular and other chronic afflictions now skyrocketing around the world.

"In my opinion, the best place to thrive is the place that is least developed," he says. "I want to involve the Indonesian communities in my research and improve whatever health condition needs to be improved there. I'm not going to limit myself to dengue, because, I think, there aren't enough people to do other things. I like research, but I don't want to do research for itself. I want to see change."

Hadisoemarto may not be a man with a plan, but he's clearly a man with a mission.

Amy Gutman is a senior writer at HSPH.