



# Healthcare humanitarian

PAUL HAYES

WA's Dr Aweys Omar has gone to great lengths to provide education to children and young doctors in his home country of Somalia.

They say most GPs have a recognisable altruistic streak, a desire to help their patients in all aspects of their healthcare, whether it is with something as common as a cold or as complex as mental health.

Western Australian general practice registrar Dr Aweys Omar, an international medical graduate (IMG) who immigrated to Australia from Somalia 18 years ago, has taken that altruistic streak beyond the patients in his practice.

'Due to security reasons I never managed to go back to Somalia, but I always had intentions of contributing to my homeland,' he told *Good Practice*. 'Therefore, after years of planning, I had come up with two major projects.'

Those two projects – an education fund for Somali orphans and online medical education for young doctors – have proven extremely successful and created positive education experiences for a significant number of people in Somalia.

The success of these programs was a major factor in Omar being named Person of the Year for 2014 by the Somali Media Centre, a global network of Somali journalists and bloggers that 'works for greater understanding of Somalis and Somalia around the world'.

'I honestly never wanted these projects to be about me, they were all for the orphans, junior medical doctors and their patients in Somalia. So receiving this award was an absolute surprise,' Omar said. 'Being named Person of the Year for 2014 in Somalia was

a wonderful title to earn. It made me feel even more determined to provide more for the people in my homeland.'

**“Helping orphans has always been a passion of mine ... I always had intentions of contributing to my homeland of Somalia”**

## In Australia

Omar has worked at the Murray Medical Centre (MMC), located in the WA coastal town of Mandurah, since July 2011. Prior to his time at MMC, Omar worked in several WA public and private hospitals, including Sir Charles Gairdner, Hollywood Private and Swan District hospitals, and Joondalup Health Campus. Omar's roles in these hospitals included senior registrar or medical officer in general medicine, surgery, cardiology, oncology and haematology, among others,

and he remains a senior doctor-in-charge (one day per week) at Hollywood Private Hospital.

Omar has special interests in family medicine, complex medical care and multicultural health. He also previously worked as chief surgeon at Digfer General Hospital, one of the largest hospital in Somalia.

The strong desire to help the people of his homeland, however, has never been far from Omar's mind. The first of his two successful projects, which allows orphans better access to education, came about in the mid 1990s.

'Helping orphans has always been a passion of mine and when the [Somali] civil war began I felt that I was their hope of survival and safety,' he said. 'As I was a part of the Somalian intellectual group of men and women who were campaigning for peace, we made it our top priority to make sure the young and poor orphans weren't forcefully roped into joining the war.'

'This lead to our slogan: "Put the gun down and pick up the pen".'

The biggest part of helping to make sure disadvantaged children were not forced to



Images: Aweys Omar

Dr Aweys Omar's love for his homeland through providing education for Somali orphans and young doctors are reasons he's the 2014 Somali Person of the Year.

become part of the war was the provision of access to free education.

'My intention has been to provide the orphans in Somalia a safe environment with access to education in order to become independent and productive members of their communities and the world,' Omar said. 'In order to gain enough funds to support the education program, I began chipping in money and, eventually, with the help of social media, I began to get in touch with my childhood friends, school and university mates from all parts of the world.'

'The sources of the funds needed for the projects to work are provided by only me, my family and my friends.'

'Their full support has provided for the program just enough to kick-start the orphanage educational program ... and I have managed to give over 1000 orphans, male and female, free access to education.'

The second of Omar's major projects involves providing a free consultation



and teaching program to junior medical doctors in Somalia. Omar provides the lesson himself via Skype and believes his program could potentially have applications in other places.

'My program could definitely be used by other doctors in many other countries,' he said. 'For example, many GP doctors from the rural parts of Australia discuss cases with other consultants via Skype.'

Omar's tireless philanthropic efforts in his home country have also resulted in the construction of a number of wells and basic schools in Somalia. The work is a major part of his life and something he learnt from a young age.

'I was inspired by both of my parents,' he said. 'My parents were always fond of reaching out to others and supporting the needy.'