

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**
**DZULKIFLI  
ABDUL RAZAK**

**N**EW Straits Times celebrates 170 years with the tag line Inspired by Greatness this year. It so happens I also celebrate 20 years as a columnist with a more modest feeling guided by humbleness.

It is indeed humbling to be part of a tradition that makes up the institution's memories. My column was initiated by one of the then editors, Rose Ismail, when Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) won the bid to create and host the nation's first National Poison Centre.

It was a proud moment for the country's first school of pharmaceutical sciences which has already set up the National Drug Centre — another first for the nation. In fact, a few years after the establishment of the National Poison Centre, the Doping Control Centre was also created out of the school, yet another

# Thanks for the 20 years

first for Malaysia and Asean.

In 1998, the National Poison Centre was recognised as the World Health Organisation Collaboration Centre for Drug Information Service (WHOCC) for the Western Pacific region — another first. Such was the standing of USM then, the second oldest university living up to its motto *Kami Memimpin* (We Lead).

All these centres serve not only to value-add teaching and learning but also research, providing updated knowledge of the various fields. More importantly, they act as cogent points of interaction with the community and the public.

This was long before words such as "community engagement" or "knowledge transfer" were fashionably used, at times reluctantly because they were not part of the image of an ivory tower.

After all, under the maxim "public or perish", knowledge is to be circulated in obscure journals sanctioned by peers, quite aloof from prying public eyes.

So it was under these strenuous conditions that Rose worked her charms on me to do a weekly write-up of not more than 800 words under the strap *Poison Control*. Many of my peers regarded it a futile exercise to defy the rules of the ivory tower, with no academic reward or recognition attached to it.

The phrase "publish or perish" reads more like "conform or be damned". My non-conformist self would rather be damned and I refused to be herded around mindlessly.

So, Rose won the day, and later I found out that to write meaningfully in 800 words for the public is no mean feat.

Trained to write for a select few with copious footnotes, cross-references and quotes to back an argument, I was constrained by the strict word count. Suffice to say that this was a humbling experience beyond the scope of academe. But it soon turned into a hobby and, later, a compelling habit!

The rewards and, at times, recognition come in different ways, and it is academically enriching when readers share their comments. Suddenly one feels appreciated and relevant. The ivory tower is just one of many seats of learning, and a conceited one at that.

The most precious lesson learnt at the helm of the National Poison Centre and WHOCC was the weekly column engaged with the people who mattered while shaping new thinking. I gained the courage to be different, if not to lead.

On the threshold of writing a column for 21 years this week, I am thankful for Rose, and those who took over after her — Alan Rashid, Norman Ignatius, Faezah Ismail and, now, Hazlina Aziz, for maintaining the column while not forgetting many others behind the scene. To date, more than 1,000 articles have been penned, culminating in a six-volume compilation on select topics under the *Voicing Concern* series.

I am privileged to be given the space to voice my concerns, many of which are provocative and controversial, but mostly contrarian viewpoints.

There were hardly any attempt to censor, or complaints from my "bosses" (except one who felt that I appeared too often in the media relative to him).

With these limited but real experiences, I urge those in the academic circles to regularly use the mass media to expound ideas without fear or favour.

We are a neutral party for the benefit of the community to which the university belongs. This is a call of duty as part of its "third mission" to co-create knowledge for mutual benefit.

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