

Setting sights on new horizons

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Comment

[The New Sunday Times - 02/14/2010](#)

MALAYSIA and Cuba created history this week when their leading institutions, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Finlay Institute respectively, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which will facilitate the development of a new, more affordable meningitis vaccine.

The MOU was signed at the Malaysian Embassy in Havana and witnessed by guest-of-honour Senior Science Adviser to the Cuban Council of State Dr Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart and Malaysian Ambassador to Cuba Yean Yoke Heng.

Prior to this, both institutions have been partners for almost eight years doing various academic and research collaboration on the quiet.

Malaysia, being largely a Muslim country, has much to offer in tandem with Cuba's well recognised experience in the area of vaccine production.

Cuba has excelled in the field of medical biotechnology since the days of President Fidel Castro.

With the MOU in place, the two partners will exchange expertise in their areas of strength not only to produce the vaccines for global consumption, but also to ensure worldwide distribution.

The Muslim population will benefit from this since the vaccine is a requirement for the purposes of pilgrimage to Mecca.

The world population, particularly the poor, also stand to gain from it. This is a vision shared by both institutions, if not both the sovereign nations.

The signing of the MOU, which coincided with the 7th International Congress on Higher Education in Havana with the theme The University for a Better World, underscored the universality of MOUs in creating a better world.



Veronica Reyes Soza focuses on her work in a class at the Latin American Medical School in Havana, Cuba. The country is well recognised in the field of vaccine production.

Nothing is more meaningful than making available a vaccine that could save millions of lives.

Taking the global H1N1 scare as a salutary lesson, the availability of a well-tested and affordable vaccine is crucial.

The disparity between the developed and developing countries became starkly evident in the recent outbreak of the flu epidemic.

While the former have booked the production of the vaccine in advance, the latter are largely deprived although they are more vulnerable to the viral menace.

Only after the scare has somewhat "subsided" and the vaccine is shrouded in controversy that excess stock is offered to the developing countries.

The fact remains that should there be a widespread global epidemic, many more deaths will occur in developing countries, which brings us back to the argument under the "internationalisation" banner discussed in *Learning Curve* (Feb 7)!

After all, like education, health is becoming a big business, and vaccines are valued as money-spinners.

We must compliment Cuba for its success in not only the area of vaccines production, of which Finlay Institute is the foremost authority, but also in healthcare — as recognised by the United Nations.

That Cuba has done this almost single-handedly through its own indigenous talent development initiative over the years is something to be admired.

It was more than a year after the collapse of the United States-backed military dictatorship of the Batista regime in January 1959 that the "siege" of Cuba took place.

Initially, the US government declared a partial embargo prohibiting exports to Cuba except for non-subsidised foodstuffs and medicines.

But over the next 50 years, Cubans felt the full brunt of the allegedly "illegal" embargo, which included importing any Cuban goods to the US (including food and medicines); all other types of commercial activity between the two countries; imports of third country products that contain Cuban materials; third country ship visiting Cuba from docking in US ports; and open trade between Cuba and US subsidiaries.

Even though travel to Cuba for US citizens has been more relaxed recently, in essence Cuba is still being discriminated!

All these, no doubt, are intended "to wipe (Cubans) off the face of the Earth," to quote President Theodore Roosevelt, in a letter to one Henry White regarding the issue.

Ironically, statements of this nature today will incur the wrath of America.

But true to the adage "necessity is the Mother of invention", Cuba is still surviving, and its advances in the medical and health sectors remain the envy of many nations — the majority of whom receive financial and technical aids as well as direct investments from foreign donors and countries.

Unfortunately, many remain dependant on these instruments, and few manage to emulate the Cubans to make it on their own merits!

Therein lies a valuable lesson for Malaysia, at least in healthcare settings, as it opens up a new horizon for learning together with Cuba.

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