

What's in a number, really?

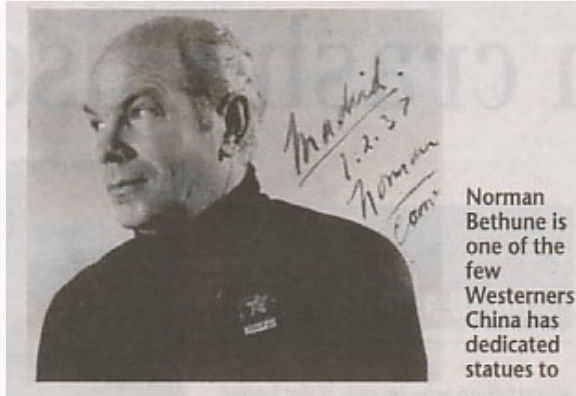
Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Comment

New Sunday Times - 06/07/2009

WHAT is the cap for the number of SPM subjects a student can take? Sounds easy, but not quite, unless there is a context of purpose.

A recent book entitled *Norman Bethune* by Adrienne Clarkson may be a good start.



Norman who? A perfectly legitimate question since he was virtually unknown even in his hometown during his time. Not exactly a star student perhaps.

This year is 70 years since Henry Norman Bethune died in China while serving the Chinese Communists in their war against Japan at the age of 49. Born an average Canadian, he had his early education in Ontario. He enrolled at the University of Toronto in 1909.

Scoring top grades may not have been the in-thing then. Passion was.

According to Clarkson, Bethune worked in lumber camps teaching rough immigrant men in order to pay for his university education.

At times, he volunteered as a labourer-teacher in remote camps in northern Ontario, teaching how to read and write English.

He developed a particular fortitude and self-reliance with a keen sense of service to others shaped by his own experiences.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, he suspended his medical studies. And did more volunteer work.

By 1919, he began an internship specialising in children's diseases at The Hospital for Sick Children in London.

Later, he went to Edinburgh for his fellowship qualification at the Royal College of Surgeons. Bethune grew up with a "fear of being mediocre" instilled into him by his parents.

In 1929, Bethune joined the thoracic surgical pioneer at Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, the teaching hospital affiliated with the prestigious McGill University.

Bethune Rib Shears is an instrument named after his invention which is still in use today. He developed and modified more than a dozen new surgical tools, and innovated several thoracic techniques.

Due to overwork and from his close contact with the poor, Bethune contracted tuberculosis (TB), and sought treatment at the Trudeau Sanatorium near New York, then the place for established TB treatment: total bed rest.

While convalescing, Bethune found out about a radical new treatment for TB called pneumothorax which involved artificially collapsing the tubercular (diseased) lung, thus allowing it to rest and heal itself.

The physicians at the Trudeau thought this procedure was too new and risky, but not Bethune. He had the operation performed and made a full and complete recovery.

This changed his life. He became a thoracic surgeon in order to defeat the scourge of TB for which many died because of poor and inaccessible care.

He eventually left his prestigious position in Montreal to head a surgical team run by nuns.

This was the start of another new experience for him, the likes of today's *Medicin Sans Frontieres* which later took him to other countries and war-torn places working in the worst of circumstances.

He taught and trained youngsters to support quality healthcare. As noted by Clarkson, he fought the disease both as a doctor and social activist.

Bethune was also a painter and founder of a children's art school. He was quoted as saying: "I am an artist."

Also a published poet and short-story writer, he claimed to work through "intuition".

He has left his legacy in schools, colleges and universities to memorial houses, squares and statues, all eager to take his name.

Canada declared Bethune a Person of National Historic Significance, and recently inducted him into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame.

There are films and documentaries on his life and adventures too; also books and other compilations. In 1990, to commemorate the centenary of his birth, postage stamps were issued in his honour.

Bethune is probably one of the few Westerners to whom China has dedicated statues throughout the country and it has named medical schools and universities after him.

Additionally, a 20-part drama series, *Dr Norman Bethune* (2006), was produced with a budget of close to US\$4 million (RM14.4 million), said to be the most expensive Chinese TV series.

As one closes the book about Bethune, one cannot help but wonder how many "As" it would take to nurture such a wholesome person.

Does the number of subjects matter in fostering a learning environment so rich that creativity and intuition are infused; that art, poetry and sciences converge as one?

Pick a number if that is what it takes. So be it. But then the converse could also hold true. As is often the case, to learn more, teach less!

Bethune is what he was, foremost, because he became human! And there can be no number of "As" or subjects that can guarantee that. Otherwise, we will be blessed with many more Norman Bethunes among us today.

Like humans, education unfortunately is not a numbers game.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

[Terms & Conditions](#)