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Dr Abhimanyu Veerakumarasivam,
Best Science Communicator award recipient, FameLab International 2016

Raising interest in science

DUTY: Malaysian scientists need to be bold and share their works with society

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SCIENTISTS not only have the duty to raise the level and quality of their research and development (R&D) activities and the ecosystem of their research areas, they also have a role to play in encouraging the involvement of more Malaysians in the field of science.

According to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) geneticist and educator Dr Abhimanyu Veerakumarasivam, Malaysian scientists need to be bold and share their works in the labs with the society at large.

"We often hear that the interest to pursue studies in science is waning in the country. This is alarming. For Malaysia to advance into the 21st century, we have to ensure that all the advancements (in the field of science) made in the last five decades must be continued by the younger generation. And this can only be done if the youths get involved in the sciences to reach greater heights in the international arena," he said.

"Malaysian youths must go from just being able to use technology to realising why science is extremely important for them to understand and improve themselves," he added.

Abhimanyu recently won the Best Science Communicator award at FameLab International 2016, beating more than 2,000 scientists from 27 countries in the competition organised by The Times Cheltenham Science Festival in the United Kingdom. The Malaysian Industry-Government for High Technology (MIGHT) and British Council Malaysia run the competition in Malaysia.

His three-minute talk to a non-scientific audience on how genetics changed the way cancer is diagnosed and treated in the age of precision medicine led the pack in terms of content, clarity and charisma and

won the votes of judges with backgrounds in science, science communication, media and also FameLab's former finalists.

Abhimanyu said the three minutes during the finals was stressful for all participants as they had to filter and condense the information from their various researches and make their presentation engaging to a general public audience. This was followed by a question-and-answer session with the judges.

"To me, what was important was what the audience wanted to know. So I kept things in layman's terms, inserted humour and gave analogies. For example, I illustrated cancer as similar to road accidents — the more we are on the road, the more we are exposed to road accidents. The risk of cancer correlates with age," he shared.

As for the competition, Abhimanyu felt any of the 12 finalists could have won. "But I believe being Malaysian, and thus coming from a heterogeneous society, helps a lot. We are adaptable and are able to relate to and feel other people's cultures and this translates well in the presentation."

Abhimanyu, 37, honed his public speaking skills during his school days by representing SM Sultan Abu Bakar in Kuantan, Pahang in debates and public speaking competitions. He received a first class Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Sciences degree from UPM in 2002 and a PhD in Oncology from the University of Cambridge in 2008.

His main laboratory research interests involve the identification of novel molecular markers for the diagnosis, prognosis and therapy of urological cancers, bladder cancer specifically.

He is working with a group of clinicians and scientists towards developing a network of collaborators in Malaysia. He aims to introduce an interdisciplinary approach that is not limited to advancing bladder cancer research and translating laboratory findings to clinic, but also increasing public awareness about bladder cancer and providing educational and support services for the bladder cancer community.

At UPM, Abhimanyu is involved



Dr Abhimanyu Veerakumarasivam during an outreach programme organised by the Young Scientists Network-Academy of Sciences Malaysia in Tamparuli, Sabah.

in the teaching of two undergraduate programmes — Doctor of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences Degree — as well as MSc and PhD programmes.

"My career is built on a tripartite mission that focuses on building education, research and service excellences in Malaysia. Therefore, together with the Academy Sciences of Malaysia (ASM), I have engaged myself in a few programmes that foster excellence and interest in science among schoolchildren," he said.

As the founding member and chairman of the 52-strong Young Scientists Network ASM (YSN-ASM), Abhimanyu is also on a mission to recognise and gather outstanding young Malaysian scientists to work together to not only enhance their research mission but also contrib-

ute holistically to the Malaysian education, research and scientific ecosystem.

On the significance of the achievement at FameLab, Abhimanyu said this means that Malaysians can achieve success if they believe in themselves and take up opportunities to compete internationally.

"If we were to rise to the challenges of the 21st century, it is not only important that we do things, but to do it at an international scale and be truly competitive. Our heterogeneous culture and environment is a special training ground for all of us. Learn to believe, fellow Malaysians — besides badminton, squash and bowling — that maybe there are lots of Malaysian brains that can also compete with the best around the world."