

LETTER TO EDITOR

THE DEPARTMENT OF ALLIED HEALTH SCIENCES: FROM INFANCY TO TODDLER

PART I. THE BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES DEGREE COURSE

Dear Editor,

The Department of Allied Health Sciences came into being in May 1993 with the objective of implementing two new courses in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya. The time course taken to give birth to these two courses stretches back for a far longer time frame. The courses referred to are the degree course in Nursing Science and the degree course in Biomedical Sciences. The evolution of these courses make an interesting and educational study of the procedures and processes involved in formulating and implementing university courses.

The Biomedical Sciences course was established with the primary objective of upgrading medical laboratory technology in Malaysia. The first step was mooted by the medical laboratory technologists themselves. The first meeting was held in 1986 and involved the participation of medical laboratory technologists, academic staff involved in medical laboratory technologists training and an expert from the United Kingdom. The main outcome of this meeting was the initiation of a series of moves over the following years culminating in the approval of the course by the JPA in the latter part of 1992. The period of time from then till the beginning of the academic year in 1993 saw a flurry of activity to set in motion steps to put in place a functional teaching program and department for the implementation of this course.

July 1993 saw the recruitment of the first batch of students comprising mainly of medical laboratory technologists and a small number of STPM students from secondary school. The academic program was run largely with contribution from various academic departments in the faculty. The first of the academic staff of the department were recruited in the same year - a total intake of two. Currently, there are four departmental academic staff, one technical staff and one scientific staff - all involved in the organisation and running of the biomedical sciences teaching programme. Input from other departments in the faculty remain substantial and is likely to continue so for the near future.

Since its inception, the department has taken in three batches of students. Student numbers remain small both by design and by necessity. Infrastructure necessary for the training of the students is limited and will remain so till the physical structure for the department is ready, tentatively in early 1997. 1996 will see the graduation of the first batch of our students. With this milestone, the department will also see a major change in the teaching programme. The course will be reorganised to run in a semester style system. With this, there will be greater flexibility for students. The course will cater for both full-time as well as part-time students. The latter option is expected to prove invaluable, particularly for medical laboratory technologists in service, who can now opt to follow the course without having to leave their jobs completely.

The biomedical sciences course aims to train laboratory professionals who are proficient at the bench as well as have a solid foundation in the medical based sciences. The course is tailored to provide basic and applied practical training to students. Theoretical input provides students with the necessary background to understand the basis of laboratory investigations with respect to patient care, and the scientific basis of laboratory instrumentation and analytical procedures. An introduction to biostatistics epidemiology and research methods aims to give students the foundation on which to build research capabilities, be it as an officer in a teaching/service/research laboratory or as a student pursuing further studies in the sciences. A course in the theory and practice of management is given in the final year of the programme. It is envisaged that this component of the training programme will equip students with fundamental principles of management on which to build their supervisory/management skills in the laboratory. In a nutshell the course is tailored primarily to produce graduates who can function as adequately equipped medical laboratory scientific officers - at technical and supervisory levels. Be that as it may, career options for graduates

are not restricted to that of officers in service laboratories. Graduates have the option to seek a career in the medical industry including medical equipment & medical supplies; pharmaceutical industry; research institutes; teaching institutes. With the rapid pace of industrialisation in Malaysia, it bodes well for graduates seeking to advance their studies in various health related areas. Options for graduate studies are available both locally as well as in overseas institutions.

During the initial charting of the biomedical sciences course, the decision was taken to produce monodiscipline graduates majoring in only one of the major branches of laboratory medicine. The first three batches of students have been trained in this manner. However, the current trend worldwide is to produce multidiscipline profes-

sionals. With this in mind, and with the opportunity to reorganise the course to suit a semester style system, the move was made recently to tailor the course to provide multidisciplinary options. This has the advantage of providing graduates with a wider career option and a wider choice of postgraduate courses. The semester system is due to be implemented in the 1996 academic year. This point represents a milestone in the development of the department. Laboratory infrastructure is in place for the undertaking of postgraduate training. Research activity in the department is picking up pace. The department is actively involved in the planning of the physical structure for relocation to more permanent premises. Recruitment for additional staff is ongoing. Graduation of the first batch of students is eagerly awaited.

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