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SINCE 2007, individuals who significantly contributed to the community and nation in their respective fields have been recognised annually with the Merdeka Award.

Mooted by oil companies Petrolia National Bhd (Petronas), ExxonMobil and Shell, the award aims to celebrate the spirit of independence beyond national sovereignty.

It explores the liberation of the mind and spirit — factors that realise the human potential while in pursuit of excellence.

This year, seven distinguished individuals were honoured with the prestigious 2018 Merdeka Award at a ceremony graced by Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, who is the royal patron of the Merdeka Award Trust.

In his welcoming speech, Petronas president and chief executive officer Tan Sri Wan Zulkiflee Wan Ariffin said it had been 11 years since the debut of the award, which was presented to ordinary people who went above their calling to perform extraordinary feats.

"The Merdeka Award is a fitting salute to their achievements. Some have contributed immensely to the trove of human understanding and knowledge.

"Some have pursued their passion, giving voice and expression to the Malaysian identity. Some have led social causes that uplifted the lives of many, and some have left lasting legacies that deliver dividends to society at large," said Wan Zulkiflee.

There were two recipients in the Health, Science and Technology Category, which was a recognition for those involved in the creation, development, support and application of new and innovative technologies to improve lives.

International Medical University (IMU) chancellor Datuk Professor Dr Gan Ee Kiang was selected for his pioneering work in developing an exemplary commercial model for research and development (R&D) in Malaysian universities.

His co-recipient, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Faculty of Veterinary Medicine dean Professor Dr Mohd Hair Bejo, was recognised for advancing sustainable food production through the development and commercialisation of chicken vaccines.

Penang-born Gan, who is regarded as one of the first few pharmacologists in Malaysia, studied for his honours degree in the University of Western Australia.

His passion and dedication have earned him global accolades. He was among the pioneers who established Universiti Sains Malaysia's (USM) Drug Research Centre in 1978, the National Poison Centre in 1994 and the National Doping Control Centre in 1996.

He has been recognised on the international stage by the International Health Advisory Panel of the United States Pharmacopeia Convention, and is also an adviser to the Malaysian Society of Pharmaceutical Trade and Manufacturers Association.

When asked which accomplishments he was most proud of, Gan said: "That would be completing my doctorate in two and a half years; advancing USM's School of Pharmaceutical Sciences as the premier institution in the region, and successfully establishing the first commercial arm of the university, the USAINS Group of Companies".

USAINS Group was the first company with a sustainable commercial model to be set up by a public university in Malaysia and Gan, as the founding group managing director, had



Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, who is the royal patron of the Merdeka Award Trust, congratulating Dr Gan Ee Kiang at the Merdeka Award 2018 presentation ceremony.

Honouring the spirit of independence

led it from 2000 to 2013.

He was responsible for directing USAINS to become a model of private-public partnership in the R&D industry, offering research services and serving as a referral centre for international agencies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, World Health Organisation and Rockefeller Foundation.

USAINS was also the first university incubator to receive MSC status in 2002.

Gan's passion comes from his innate curiosity and love of developing things. He is a firm believer that technology will propel Malaysia to greater heights.

Throughout his career, he has commercialised three patents and nine technologies owned by USM with Malaysian Bio-Diagnostics Research Sdn Bhd.

"Initially it was exhilarating, but slowly the task of developing and advancing pharmacy education for the nation became a passion," Gan said.

"Now, with Industrial Revolution 4.0, the government and system have to encourage the younger generation to think out of the box, and even beyond."

He said there were no short cuts, "though we can search for smart ways to address societal challenges".

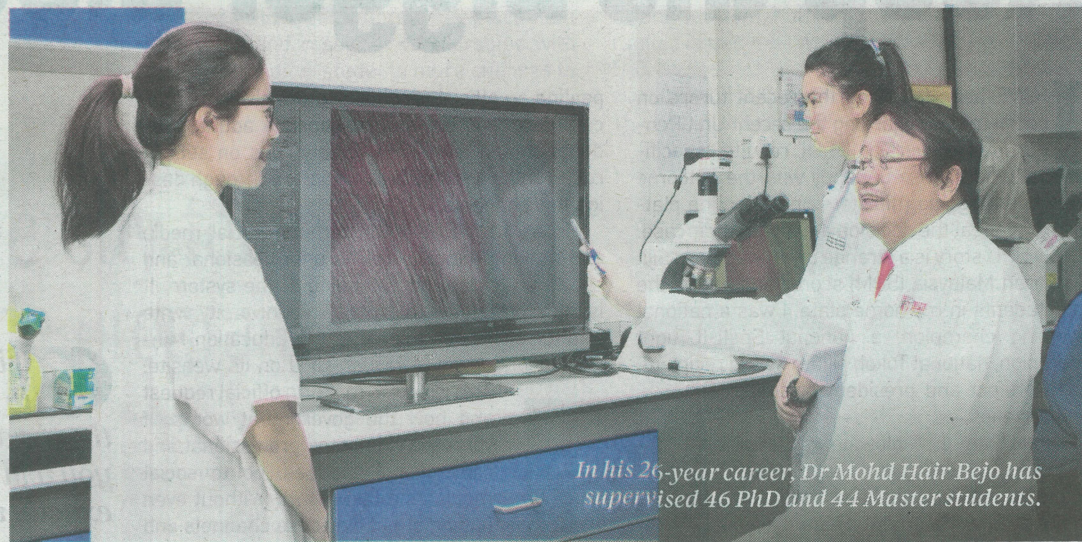
"Determination, perseverance and staying focused are still the cornerstones of success. The authorities must formulate programmes that provide exposure to young scientists."

He urged budding scientists to give their best in whatever they do.

"Be focused and be committed. Be prepared to work hard and smart. Remember, failures are often just stepping stones to ultimate success," said Gan.

Dr Hair's career has spanned more than 26 years.

He is the first researcher in the country to



In his 26-year career, Dr Mohd Hair Bejo has supervised 46 PhD and 44 Master students.

diagnose the Infectious Bursal Disease (IBD) (also known as Gumboro disease) that was caused by the IBD virus in 1991. In 2005, he studied the Fowl Adenovirus (FAdV) outbreak that caused Inclusion Body Hepatitis (IBH) in the local poultry industry.

His research subsequently led to the development of MyVAC UPM93 and MyHatch IBD vaccines.

The vaccines, in turn, played a huge role in developing and improving sustainable poultry farming practices in the country, and have transformed it into an exemplary model for the nation's livestock industry. "I enjoy and appreciate what I do as an academician. In life, there are so many challenges, but what is important is how we respond and adapt to them. Challenges are opportunities and we should strive to excel to become successful," he said.

He has at least seven products in

the process of commercialisation. He is actively developing bacterial vaccines for Salmonellosis, Avian Pathogenic E. Coli Infection and Fowl Cholera. The vaccines will minimise the use and abuse of antibiotics in the poultry industry, which prevents the rise of antimicrobial resistance among humans.

As a result of his in-depth knowledge and many years of experience, Dr Hair is regarded as one of Malaysia's foremost experts in veterinary pathology. He has supervised 46 PhD and 44 Master students.

Throughout his career, Dr Hair has never wavered from his commitment in putting his knowledge to good use.

His message to young Malaysians embarking on research is to look for what comes after "your contribution to society".

"No matter what sort of research you plan to do, always look towards solving the problems of society," he said.