The CEO Column
July 31, 2010

http://www.businesstimes.com.sg/sub/premiumstory/0,4574,397525,00.html

Science for the next generation

Science should be celebrated and put on a par with other fields and professions. But how do we inspire more youths to take up careers in science?

FROM THE DESK OF
Lim Tit Meng
Chief executive,
Science Centre Singapore

SCIENCE leads to new discoveries and innovations. As a nation with no natural resources, science is a means of ensuring Singapore’s survival in an ever-competitive world - it provides us with the opportunity to develop ground-breaking technology and products that can be sold to global markets. Our water technology and biomedical science products are good examples of such advancements.

But how many are really willing to put in the time and effort to embrace science as a career? Perhaps a career in science may lack the glory and fame of careers in other fields that entice youths with glamour, awards and media attention.

So why would one choose a career in science? Let me share how I answered that question, and why I chose to make science my life’s calling.

The spark that started it

As a child, I was always curious about the things around me. I enjoyed observing animals and plants to see how they lived and interacted. My childhood was spent catching ‘longkang (drain) fish’ from the Stamford Canal and spiders near my school on Mt Sophia. I lived within a stone’s throw of the National Museum, National Library and bookshops in Bras Basah, which helped quench my thirst for knowledge and opened my eyes to the world.
The first movie I saw was a documentary on nature. My fascination was further enhanced by my family's move to a farm in Lim Chu Kang. It led to me stepping on snakes, collecting insects for class projects, catching birds, swimming in ponds with ducks and geese, and planting crops. Biology became my favourite subject and I always topped my class.

In Secondary 3, my biology teacher gave my friends and me a project to test the effects of the amount of water on plant growth - to prove that more did not mean better growth and to learn about water conservation. After the experiment, we had to reject our hypothesis because our data showed that the pot with oversaturated water resulted in the best growth. We then realised we had chosen a water-loving plant for our experiment, and hence the outcome. Nonetheless, the experiment won us a consolation prize at a science fair, giving me the affirmation that science could be fun and was about uncovering the facts in pursuit of the 'scientific truth'.

So, curiosity drove my passion for science. Today, it is the conviction that science is the engine for the growth of the knowledge economy.

Singapore is doing the right thing investing in education, R&D infrastructure and human resource development. Organisations like the Agency for Science, Technology And Research (A*STAR) help support Singapore's key economic clusters by providing intellectual, human and industrial capital to its partners in industry. It also supports extramural research in the universities, hospitals, research centres, and with other local and international partners.

As a result, Singapore offers an excellent platform and an ecosystem connecting lab bench results to market shelves. Bringing in global industries and investors establishes Singapore as a credible and competent R&D hub, and is key to creating jobs and growing our economy.

The dilemma of science

Alas, one perennial challenge around the world today is getting people interested in physics, and this, in turn, has an impact on enrolment in engineering courses everywhere. Simply, we need engineers because scientific knowledge cannot be translated into products without them. Engineers help to enhance research capabilities, and hence output.

When choosing a career in science, many may opt for the life sciences and biomedical fields, a wave that has swept not just Singapore but the globe.

These other career options may appeal more to today's youth than the seemingly demanding and behind-the-scenes work that engineers perform.
So, how do we inspire more youths to take up careers in science? I believe that science should be celebrated and put into the deserving limelight on a par with other fields and professions.

At Science Centre Singapore - Singapore's third most-visited attraction - our mission is to promote interest, learning and creativity in science and technology. A good example of how we do this is the Singapore Science Festival 2010 which kicked off on Monday. Jointly organised with A*STAR, the annual festival celebrates the dynamism of science, engineering, technology and biomedicine.

Over the next three weeks, scientists from research institutes, schools and partner institutions will personally share their passion for science with the public, through engaging exhibitions, open houses, hands-on school-based activities, a sci-fi movie forum, and more.

Perhaps through these sorts of interactions with scientists, youths will be 'infected' with their passion and consider a meaningful, exciting career in science. I hope that they will discover what I have learned. That the fun of being a scientist is that it is a hobby and work all rolled into one.