

A pharmacist in conflict zones

KOTA KINABALU: UCSI graduate delivers humanitarian aid to those who need it the most.

The whistling sound of the incoming mortar shells would be followed by explosions as the mortar hit its target.

There was constant shelling nearby and the threat of losing life – or limb – when hit by a stray mortar. It was a war zone and Alvin Teo Kuo Jing was in the midst of it. He is not a soldier used to armed conflict – he is a pharmacist who graduated from UCSI University in 2010. And he chose to be there.

It was about two years upon graduation, working for the Malacca General Hospital, when Alvin felt that he wanted, and could, do more.

“My career and salary prospects were good, but I knew I could serve a larger purpose,” he said.

His experience as Organising Chairperson of the UCSI University 7th Annual Public Health Campaign saw him multitasking and organising one of the biggest and most successful community health events along with his fellow pharmacy students. This gave him an early inclination that he was a person who enjoyed a challenge, and the learning process, especially if it could serve society.

A flagship event of the Faculty, the Campaign has been held for more than 13 years in a row, and the students have made a name for themselves among the public for their professionalism and competence.

In a way, Teo shared, the experience was a smaller-scaled version of the humanitarian projects that he does now, as a pharmacist for the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the No-

bel Peace Prize 1999 awardee, also known as Doctors without Borders.

The application process itself took 6 months and was one of the toughest Teo had undergone. He was tested on multiple aspects, from his knowledge to his character. On top of his résumé, he had a phone interview, written assessment, face-to-face interview and group exercise with the other applicants. The process took six months.

In this, he is thankful that his lecturers at UCSI's Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences pushed him to challenge himself in his studies. Fully accredited by the Pharmacy Board Malaysia, UCSI's Bachelor of Pharmacy (Hons) utilises a student-centered and hands-on approach that facilitates a more effective understanding of the curriculum.

The high standards demanded by the lecturers made it easy for him to work with his team members from all over the world – many of whom are very experienced and respected in their fields.

Speaking frankly, he admitted that the first time he heard the explosions, he had doubts about his decision to join MSF.

“I asked myself, why on earth was I there – at a place where for the first time, I felt that my life was threatened,” he said. Alvin was deployed in MSF's medical emergency response at northern Syria in 2013.

On top of the fears of being shelled, he had to deal with the horrors of war. He saw his first gunshot wounds as well as soldiers and civilians who lost limbs or were embedded with shrapnel from mortar attacks.

But he stayed – liaising with a lead pharmacist in

neighbouring countries to bring in medical supplies and deciding which were needed more urgently. He also worked with his team members to oversee the training of local staff.

Unlike other humanitarian missions which usually lasted for several months, this was an emergency one that took just a month due to the highly stressful nature of the assignment.

So despite the safety concerns, why did he stay?

“I trust the organisation,” he said simply.

At the end of every day, the project coordinator would brief the team on the risks and members would discuss their views on the safety of the team. Each member knew that if they wanted to leave, the organisation would bring them home on the next flight back. The reassurance and trust made it easier for the members to focus on giving aid to those who need it the most, regardless of colour, religion or creed.

Two years and several war-ridden and endemic-hit countries later, the doubts have lessened. In his words, he now focuses on ‘doing as much as I can, during my time in these conflict areas’. To date, he has completed MSF assignments in South Sudan, Ukraine and Pakistan, among others. All the missions took 5-8 months.

Two years of humanitarian work is longer than what many others have done. Why does he keep going back?

Looking thoughtful, Teo acknowledged that it is really tiring – both physically and mentally. However, the ability to impact entire communities who need his pharmaceutical knowledge the most, makes it all worth it.

“Every time I return, I will be exhausted and tell myself that it is the last time. After five days at home, I would be ready to fly off again,” he said. The steep learning curve of the job and the experience of not just working with colleagues from around the world, but learning to live with them, are things that he finds invaluable.

Currently back home while waiting for his next

assignment from MSF, Teo is enjoying the time spent with his family, who are his strongest support. He shares that while they are naturally concerned about his safety, they understand his passion.

Although his parents are not highly educated themselves – his father is a small-time businessman and his mother did not complete her primary education – they always emphasised the importance of education. Growing up with his two younger brothers, his mother would sit with them to ensure they completed their homework.

“Her philosophy is, because she did not have the opportunity to pursue an education, she must do everything she can to ensure her kids did well in school.”

Today, one younger brother is a doctor and the other pursuing his Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM).

Having been trained by UCSI to continuously advance knowledge, Teo is making plans to pursue his master's. He wants to focus on research so that he can help a wider population with his work.

As MSF does not require members to resign – they can take a break before signing up again for emergency assignments several

years down the road – Teo knows that his stint with MSF will not end.

“I get to learn something new professionally and per-

sonally with every new mission, and I help those who need it the most. To

me, that is what pharmacy is all about,” he said with a smile.



Teo (second from right), with Médecins Sans Frontières colleagues from all around the world.