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A Technophile at 92

Dr. Vincent Tabone, 'Censu' as he is affectionately known, has always been a pioneer and an innovator, eager to experiment with new technologies and ideas. Hailing from a family of doctors (his father and two brothers), he followed suit, graduating in 1937, with the single-minded mission of eradicating the incidence of trachoma.

At the time, trachoma was the most rampant cause of blindness in the world, and combating the misconceptions surrounding the discovery of antibiotics, he was entrusted by the government to organise a campaign against the virulent disease in Gozo. Later, braving opposition from the medical establishment, he founded the first trade union of doctors in the world. Dr. Tabone believes that "medical pundits shouldn't be dogmatic and thereby through their authority hinder the progress of medicine, by discouraging the initiatives of a new generation of doctors." When he first submitted his experience of treating trachoma with the antibiotics 'achromycin' he was badly received in a International Congress in London."Had I not written the result of my Gozo Campaign in the British Journal of Ophthalmology, doctors would have continued to avoid the use of antibiotics in virus borne diseases. As it happened, many ophthalmologists, having read my account, began to send good results from all over the world, and this is how WHO discovered me. I subsequently became the first ophthalmologist to be entrusted with anti-trachoma campaigns in many parts of the World" he states.

Dr. Tabone chuckles as he quotes an old English textbook that advises medical students 'never to be the first to use a new procedure, but neither the last.' Therefore it comes as no surprise, that unlike other octogenarians, wary of changing their ways, he was thrilled when he was presented with a computer by his children on his 80th birthday. The love affair with this new technology did not last long, as one night, unable to print a presidential speech he was writing, he had to get out his old typewriter and start all over again. Exasperated, Dr. Tabone, regaled the computer to the cupboard and it wasn't until his presidential term came to a close, that he start tinkering with his desktop again. A self confessed, 'jack of all trades' in his spare time, he humbly declares that whilst he isn't "particularly good at anything" he'll "try his hand at everything", whether it's fixing the aerial, re-wiring his DVD (to try and transfer his vast collection of videotapes) or repairing the mechanisms of old-grandfather clocks. His curiosity is what keeps this very genial, approachable and endearing doctor, young at heart.

At 92 years of age, he spends a minimum of three hours each morning on his computer, mainly on the Internet, even though he doesn't see clearly from one eye. Entirely self taught, with a few pointers given to him by his children, he bemoans the fact that his eldest daughter didn't purchase a book for him entitled 'Computer for Idiots' upon the suggestion of her husband, on the grounds that she considered the title disrespectful. "I need to learn the basics; that book could help me enormously" he regrets.

Nonetheless, learning through trial and error he was elated – '*tlajt is-sema*' - because he had just managed to get one of his computers to recognise a new modem through his own endeavours. As I enter Dr. Tabone's house in St. Julians where he has lived since 1941, cycling each morning to the army barracks in St. Andrews where he served as a medical officer throughout the war, I am escorted by an aide de camp to a sitting room which serves as the threshold to '*studio uno e due*'. This is Dr. Tabone's terrain, a darkened den, stacked with papers, cabinets and shelves overflowing with books and photographs, rarely entered by his wife Maria . There is hardly any place to walk around. In '*studio due*', Dr. Tabone has set up a computer network, opposite two sepia portraits of his parents. A colour photograph of Dr. Tabone hangs in between them. "I'm the eldest of the three" he chortles. Dr. Tabone eases behind his latest techno toy, an HP scanner, photocopier and printer combo and proceeds to scan a picture of one of his grandsons off an e-mail printout. A workshop branches from '*studio due*' where rack upon rack of videos, copied from T.V or documenting state visits, face a workbench with every conceivable tool

imaginable. Most are rusty. Dr Tabone has just been testing a mound of batteries, which are strewn over the work surface.

Some of the videos in Dr. Tabone's collection are copies of episodes of 'Angli', the popular television series in which one of his grandsons; John Montanaro stars. "I can't understand why the police agree to take part in this TV series. *Iva, Maria!*, how can it be possible," his voice rises "that they always lose." "Internet has brought the world to our doorstep", Dr. Tabone states. He recalls that as a WHO Trachoma consultant living in Taiwan, letters would take 11 days to arrive. "Not everyone used to have a telephone at home, and calls were very expensive. We were cut off, but maybe it wasn't such a bad thing."

Dr. Tabone's self-confessed "big defect," is his handwriting. "I can't even read my own calligraphy," so as secretary of the Nationalist Party for 12 years, he would type the minutes of a meeting, and glue them on a register, "otherwise no-one would have been able to read them." That typewriter has travelled with him all over the world. "Nowadays things are so much easier and faster" and the computer has put an end to his handwriting handicap. Always, first a doctor ("it's my identity") and then a politician, Dr. Tabone uses the internet to keep abreast with the latest developments in medical science especially those concerning ophthalmology. Although no longer practicing, he still receives an average of three clients a week who come to seek advice on procedures involving their eyesight. "I go to my valise, take out my opthalmoscope and become a doctor again." Each day, after responding to e-mails, he reads the New York Times, Washington Post and Daily Telegraph online, printing articles that stimulate his political sensitivity, even though, more often than not, in the absence of a secretary, he forgets where he has filed them. "It's such a wonderful thing to be able to have all this information at your fingertips and to keep yourself so well-informed." When I ask him if maybe nowadays there's an overload of information to browse through, Dr. Tabone's reply is immediate. "You can never have too much information" he retorts. "The difficulty is in discernment. There needs to be more background training in sifting through information." "This house was empty when we first moved in. Then we filled it with eight children. Now it's empty again, but full of information," he laughs.