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Dr M calls for vigilance against hepatitis A virus

PETALING JAYA, Wed. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tonight called on the public to be vigilant in ensuring that no athlete or visitors to Malaysia are infected with the hepatitis A disease during the Commonwealth Games next year.

Dr Mahathir cautioned that if this happened, it would cast a poor image of health standards in the country.

As the disease could be contracted by eating food or drinking water contaminated with the hepatitis A virus, Dr Mahathir reminded all Malaysians, especially food handlers, to be absolutely clean when preparing food.

"The rest of us can help in this crusade by avoiding raw or inadequately cooked shellfish, salads and vegetables, untreated drinking water, ice cubes and unpasteurised milk, and by maintaining a high standard of personal hygiene."

Speaking at the launching of the Malaysian Liver Foundation at the Sunway Lagoon Resort, Dr Mahathir said hepatitis, an inflammation of the liver, was a problem in Malaysia although the overall incidence appeared to be decreasing.

Also present were the Prime Minister's wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng and Malaysian Liver Foundation president Datuk Dr Ismail Merican.

The total number of hepatitis cases reported in government hospitals has declined from 2,450 in 1992 to 1,581 last year.

"Three types of hepatitis have been reported in this country - hepatitis A, B and C.

"There are other types of hepatitis called D, E and G," he said, adding in jest that he was not sure whether the world would see the emergence of hepatitis "M" by 2020.

He said the estimated annual incidence of hepatitis A worldwide was about 1.5 million but the actual figure might be three to 10 times greater.

"Here, the reported incidence has decreased over the years with improvements in sanitation, water supply and personal hygiene," the Prime Minister said, adding that the number of hepatitis B cases had also declined.

Dr Mahathir, who is the foundation's patron, said liver cancer could be cured if discovered early like when the tumour was small and the rest of the liver was normal.

Up to 80 per cent of liver cancer patients in Malaysia sought treatment late mainly because the disease was difficult to detect in the early stages as the initial symptoms were usually vague, he said.

In Malaysia, he said there were at least 2,000 new cases of end-stage liver disease each year, of which 10 per cent require a liver transplant.

"For organ transplantation to succeed, we need public co-operation and education.

"Organ donation in this country is rather slow," he said, expressing hope that the Liver Foundation would join forces with the Health Ministry and other relevant organisations to embark on an active public education of organ donation.

To make a greater impact in this region, Dr Mahathir said there was also a need to invest in basic and clinical research.

"Research offers hope for the future and the possibility of prevention, better treatment and cure of liver disease."

Dr Mahathir said it was hoped that programmes and preparations on providing the facilities for liver transplant would be carried out so that Malaysians would no longer need to seek such treatment overseas.

Later, Dr Mahathir received donations totalling RM1.9 million for the foundation, excluding a Nissan AD Resort car from Tan Chong Motors Holding.

The other donors were TA Enterprise Bhd (RM1 million) Renong Bhd (RM250,000), Sg Way Group (RM250,000), Berjaya Sports Toto (RM100,000), Penas Sayang (RM50,000), the KRU Group of Companies (RM100,000), People's Insurance Bhd (RM50,000), Siemens (RM50,000), Technology Resources Bhd (RM50,000) and Bakti (RM50,000).

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