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Dr M: Early detection can curb liver disease

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INVESTMENTS in basic and clinical research offer hope for the future and the possibility of prevention, better treatment and cure of liver disease, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said last night.

Dr Mahathir said liver cancer, one of the top 20 cancers reported among Malaysian males, can be cured if discovered early.

"Unfortunately, up to 80 per cent of patients with liver cancer in Malaysia come too late to seek curative treatment mainly because it is difficult to detect in the early stages as the initial symptoms are usually vague," he said when launching the Malaysian Liver Foundation in Petaling Jaya.

Dr Mahathir, who is himself a medical doctor, described the liver as a "very interesting organ" and "a complex chemical factory" with over 100 functions.

It is second only to the human brain in its complexity and is vital for life.

"Unlike people, it does not complain very much and can still function normally with half its size, provided of course, that half is normal.

"We need to take care of our liver. If we do not, this non-complaining, complex chemical factory will breakdown and soon enough, we too will break down and when that happens, we have to look for a new liver if there is one," he said.

According to the Prime Minister, if it fails completely or becomes seriously damaged, the only solution is a liver transplant.

In Malaysia, there are at least 2,000 new cases of end-stage liver disease each year. Of these, 10 per cent will require a liver transplant.

"Organ donation in this country is rather slow," Dr Mahathir lamented.

He also said liver disease can affect all ages. Thousands suffer and die each year from hepatitis, liver cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and liver cancer.

Hepatitis, a form of liver disease, is sometimes referred to as a silent killer. Much like high blood pressure, people who suffer from the disease often are not aware that they have the symptoms of the disease until it is too late.

However, Dr Mahathir said, the silent killer can be overcome with early diagnosis and better treatment.

In the wake of the forthcoming Commonwealth Games next year, the Prime Minister also reminded Malaysians to continue to be vigilant and ensure that no visitors to the country are affected with the disease as it will cast a poor image of the health standards in the country.

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

Hepatitis is a problem in Malaysia but the overall incidence appears to be decreasing.

The total number of hepatitis cases reported in Government hospitals has declined from 2,450 in 1992 to 1,581 in 1996. The reported incidence of Hepatitis A has also decreased over the years with improvement in sanitation, water supply and personal hygiene.

At the function, Dr Mahathir, as a patron of the foundation, received contributions from several companies, totalling RM1.9 million and a car

(Nissan Resort 1.6) from Tan Chong Motors Holding.

Among the contributors are TA Enterprise Bhd, which contributed RM1 million, Renong Bhd RM250,000 and Sungei Way Group RM200,000.

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