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Mahathir-Telemedicine
THE MARVELS OF TELEMEDICINE

By: Azman Ujang

London, May 22 (Bernama) -- Somewhere in the 152-year old St. Mary's Hospital complex here, Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin in the last century.

The discovery of the bacteria-killing drug changed the course of medical history.

But today, this landmark achievement and subsequent feats by the hospital staff, including the invention of the ECG and in pioneering technologies for many existing medical techniques, appear to be taking a backseat to telemedicine.

Telemedicine, one of the many applications of multimedia which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is trying to lure to Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor, is already in use at St. Mary's Hospital, which boasts of one of the largest telemedicine networks in the world.

Dr Mahathir, who is here on a five-day mission to promote the MSC, Wednesday spent about two hours visiting the hospital to see for himself the marvels of telemedicine.

Telemedicine is a technology which enables radiological images (x-rays), live surgical operations and real-time consultations to be easily transmitted via interactive videoconferencing or screens.

The use of telemedicine includes for teaching, consultation and information exchange.

It enables live operations and diagnostic images to be transmitted in an interactive fashion. The advantages are that operative pictures, radiological images and even live consultations can be transmitted to an expert centre for advice or diagnosis without the physical presence of doctors.

Also new medical and surgical techniques can be more rapidly disseminated across the worldwide network.

During the visit, two real-time operations in separate operating theatres were shown to Dr Mahathir, who watched the proceedings via a big screen in another room.

Also present were Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Minister Datuk Leo Moggie, Chief Secretary to the Government Datuk Abdul Halim Ali and Director-General of Health Tan Sri Abu Bakar Sulaiman.

One of the operations was the removal of a gallstone from a 57-year old woman and the other removal of a growth in the bile of a 74-year old man.

As the surgeons cut open the patient's anatomy, they even gave a "running commentary" of the operation to Dr Mahathir and others present in the room.

Earlier, hospital chairman Lord Glenarthur, in welcoming Dr Mahathir remarked: "Because you are a doctor yourself, Mr Prime Minister, you understand better what you are going to see than myself".

He said the 650-bed teaching hospital, which also has many medical students from Malaysia, with annual turnover of 120 million pounds and 2,500 staff, looked forward to assisting Malaysia become the regional centre for telemedicine.

Prof. Ara Darzi, its training unit head, in his briefing said with telemedicine, image-guided surgeries could be done. This means telemedicine can guide a surgeon by remote control in another part of the world.

This also means that medical personnel who are not necessarily highly trained can be expected to handle tasks which previously they might not be

able to do.

"Telemedicine does to health-care what a personal computer does to an office," said Darzi.

But he warned that although telemedicine is here to stay in modern health-care, it is not "toys for the boys". -- BERNAMA

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