

25/06/2000

Meaningful work that hardly makes the news

Faezah Ismail

THE long years of quiet but meaningful work undertaken by the Institute for Medical Research has had more impact on health than people realised.

"There are many things that the institute has contributed quietly over the years which were often not highlighted or even audited," says former IMR director Datuk Dr M. Jegathesan.

"I think, in many ways, the institute can be considered an under-valued asset," adds Dr Jegathesan.

Dr Tee E. Siong, IMR's Human Nutrition Division head says all the divisions at the institute have contributed materially to the programmes initiated by the Health Ministry.

"Research findings from these divisions have helped programme managers to develop their health related activities more effectively," he says.

Many speak of the institute's long history of innovative biomedical research which has led to a better understanding of tropical diseases in this region.

Far-reaching contributions include, among others, the establishment of the National Filariasis Control Programme; research on the testing of malarial drugs; the development of Disinfection and Sterilisation Policy of the Health Ministry; in vitro culture of *Brugia malayi* parasites; identification and description of Malaysian schistomes; discovery of local *Bacillus thuringiensis* strain for the control of mosquitoes; the launching of the Nutrical software and the development of the iodination pump which is being used in the endemic goitre areas in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

The fact that the institute is a research arm of the Health Ministry is sometimes regarded as a weakness in the sense that it is a government department driven by government needs.

(The institute's core function is to carry out research for the prevention and control of diseases and on pertinent health issues.

(It also performs specialised diagnostic services, provides training in different specialised fields and offers consultative and advisory services.)

But that is actually seen as a strength because whatever the institute produced was done in response to the dictates of its government service side.

And research findings are quietly incorporated in the ministry's programmes, benefiting all Malaysians.

For instance, many of the existing disease control mechanisms were either put in place, fine-tuned or modified according to research results yielded by the institute.

"All of these did not just come out of the sky. They had to be based on studies which allowed certain policies to be formulated which were then translated into action in many areas," says Dr Jegathesan.

"If you measure the health indices that we look at today, things like the infant mortality rate and the life expectancy index, Malaysia is doing very well but no single sector can take credit for this."

There are many reasons why the infant mortality rate is improving in Malaysia, which is in fact reaching levels similar to those of more advanced countries.

Non-medical factors such as the improved literacy in mothers and increasing affluence have also played a major role.

But there were medical contributions as well and input from the IMR has permitted such policies as the immunisation policies and control programmes of major diseases such as malaria, filariasis and dengue to be instituted which subsequently led to the betterment of the nation's health.

"So everybody has a share in raising the levels of health indices. But you should also ask yourself what would have happened if a particular sector did not exist or a particular job was not done.

"What would have been if the institute was never founded," asks Dr Jegathesan, reflectively.

"Sometimes it is just taken for granted because it is there and it is contributing but nobody remembers it and nobody gives it credit."

That would be a way to get people to evaluate the institute's contributions and "the final balance sheet would show that the IMR is one of the soundest investments ever made by the Government," says Dr Jegathesan.

But like any other sound investment, it needs constant re-engineering to remain relevant.

"To be fair to the people who have been involved in the institute's evolution, this has been done from time to time," says Dr Jegathesan.

And turning 100 years compels another round of introspection in those who are concerned about the institute's future.

It is no easy feat staying in business for 100 years and to observe this noteworthy landmark, the institute has lined up various activities to last the year.

Event organisers promise something for everyone - the public, the scientific community and the IMR staff and family members.

The institute's doors will be thrown open for two days. The date of the IMR open day has been fixed for Aug 24 and it will be officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The event will give Malaysians a rare opportunity to catch glimpses of research activities at the institute which is located at Jalan Pahang, Kuala Lumpur.

Besides viewing exhibits of research activities, visitors may also attend talks on health promotion.

It would also be an excellent time for family members of IMR staff to better appreciate the workplace of their loved ones.

For the scientific community, there will be a series of seminars and workshops throughout the year.

The institute encourages the participation of fellow scientists and professionals from other organisations and students in institutions of higher learning at these scientific gatherings.

The Third Ministry of Health-Academy of Medicine International Congress in Medicine in the Tropics to be held in Kuala Lumpur from Nov 1-4 promises an exciting time for scientists and aspiring scientists.

An impressive list of local and foreign scientists have already confirmed their participation at the congress.

The National Institutes of Health Annual Scientific Meeting from August 17-18 is another major highlight.

To honour the IMR's hundredth anniversary, a set of three commemorative stamps and first-day cover as well as a centenary celebratory book will be launched soon.