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Renowned scientist at AIDS forum

WORLD renowned scientist Professor David Ho will speak at a public forum on AIDS to be held in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday.

Organised by the Nantah Education and Research Foundation, Dr Ho's talk will focus on Pathogenesis of HIV and Implications for Therapy. The forum will be held at the Mahkota 1 Ballroom, Hotel Istana, from 2-5pm and is sponsored by MUDA Holdings Bhd.

It will be officiated by Minister of Health Datuk Chua Jui Meng. AIDS Council Malaysia president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, will be delivering a speech.

Dr Ho is the scientific director with Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Centre in New York, and in 1996, was voted "Man of the Year" by Time Magazine.

The purpose of the forum is to create public awareness on AIDS and to disseminate the latest development and implications of the dreaded disease. So far, more than 100 participants have confirmed their attendance.

Dr Ho has been described by Time as someone who has "fundamentally changed the way scientists (and the world) looked at the AIDS virus, using a `cocktail' of drugs and starting treatment as soon as patients are diagnosed."

He and his colleagues discovered that contrary to popular belief of the time, AIDS is not a quiescent infection but one which the virus replicates itself aggressively throughout the long asymptomatic period. They also realised that the virus' replication process is rather error-prone, which means the virus has a high mutant rate.

Faced with many mutants, single-drug treatment is doomed to fail. This led the researchers to the idea of multiple-drug treatment, attacking the virus from many levels thus reducing the possibility of the virus evading the drugs through its many mutants.

This treatment succeeded in reducing the virus to undetectable levels in patients' bloodstream and showed the world that HIV is not as invincible as it appeared, bringing glimmer of hope that contracting AIDS is no longer a death sentence.

One of his high-profile patients was Magic Johnson, who after the combination drug therapy, has his HIV reduced to undetectable levels.

Long before Time's recognition, Dr Ho had been held in high regard in the AIDS research community and many considered him a bright star to watch.

He was involved in some of the early AIDS research, having his interest piqued by the mysterious new infectious disease that devoured immune systems of an ever-increasing number of the infected in his clinical days at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre. From the experience gained, he directed researchers that led to the publication of ground-breaking studies that slashed a path into the forest of the great unknown called AIDS.

He was the first to find out, in the 1980's that HIV can be transmitted through semen but not saliva.

Born as Ho Dai-i in Taichung, Taiwan, 1952, he went to America when he was 12 without knowing a word of English. He comes from a family of scientists, and has shown great interest in mathematics and science since his elementary school days.

Ten years after his arrival in America, having attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and California Institute of Technology

(Caltech), he obtained a Caltech BSc degree in physics summa cum laude.

Realising that medical research has greater prospects for growth, he went to Harvard Medical School obtaining his MD degree in 1978. Upon completing his medical residency at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre in 1981, he was made the chief resident in internal medicine there.

He moved on to Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School as a clinical and research fellow in 1982. He taught at Harvard Medical School, University College Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Medicine, and New York University (NYU) School of Medicine.

In 1990, he became the director and CEO of the Aaron Diamond AIDS research Centre in New York City, which is the largest private HIV/AIDS research centre in the world. The Rockefeller University appointed him a professor in 1996.

Dr Ho has published many notable books and written more than 100 articles on AIDS in leading scientific research journals.