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`Research herbal medicine'

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The time has come for Malaysia to carry out systematic research and analysis into herbal medicine, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia was rich in biological resources and had the potential to extract medicine from herbs.

He said the Health Ministry had compiled a book on herbs used in medical treatment but noted that the process was not scientific.

"It is due to luck that some people are cured using herbal medicine. We don't know what ingredient in the herb worked," he said.

Dr Mahathir said active ingredients should be extracted from herbs and research conducted on it.

He was speaking before launching the Cancer Research Initiatives Foundation (Carif) here.

Carif, set up early last year, is the first independent non-profit cancer research organisation focusing on research into cancer and developing new diagnostic therapeutic tools.

It also explores the rich local biodiversity for potential anti-cancer drugs.

"If there is a lack of effort on our part, someone from some other country will use the herb and find a cure for cancer and patent it for intellectual property despite the fact that the herb came from Malaysia. They will make tons of money by selling the medicine."

Citing an example, he said, the periwinkle flower from Madagascar was taken out of the country by someone from a developed country and developed as a cure for a certain kind of cancer. "Madagascar gets nothing."

Dr Mahathir said although the Government had decided that Malaysian herbs could not be taken out of the country, "it is difficult to stop people from stealing our plants".

"We are quite adept at stealing plants from other countries. We have to be careful as by having done that (stealing plants from others), we do not want others to steal our plants."

Dr Mahathir was referring to rubber trees from Brazil and oil palm from West Africa. "Both these countries do not have the trees anymore and we produce about 13 million tonnes of palm oil.

"However, people can come to Malaysia to conduct research. We are setting up a bio-valley with three institutes looking at data, genomics and bio-technology.

"Individuals too can make use of the intensified research priority areas fund to carry out research. Organisations like Carif could benefit from the fund. Although the Government is financing Carif, the private sector should show that they care by contributing as well.

"The two main contributors to Carif are Petronas Bhd and Yayasan Lim."

Dr Mahathir said cancer had become the "biggest killer" in the country after heart disease.

While doctors and researchers had been trying for years to find a cure for cancer, researchers had lately found medicines that could retard the growth of the disease, he said.

Dr Mahathir hoped Carif will help Malaysian identify the cause for cancer and find treatment for it.

"But we should not think of achieving this in a short space of time. Research takes a long time and lots of money."

