

Man responsible for new diseases, says virus expert

STAR - 5 SEP 2005

BY JANE RITIKOS

KUALA LUMPUR: He has dealt with some of the most dangerous viruses, faced SARS in China and Ebola in Africa but for Prof John S. Mackenzie, being scared of a viral disease is just fearing the unknown.

"If you know how a disease is spread, you can take precautions. Then there is no danger and it's not scary. It's a matter of knowing and taking the correct precaution.

"A sensible precaution to decrease the chances of being infected is to wash your hands as often as possible when you are exposed to the virus," said the Australian researcher who received the Akademi Sains

Malaysia Award for Scientific Excellence in Honour of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Saturday.

To him, rabies was more "scary" as it was always fatal.

Prof Mackenzie, who led the first WHO mission to China for SARS in 2003, said that mankind tended to overreact and destroy animal populations that carry transmittable diseases.

It was actually humans who were the culprits and animals the victims, he said, adding that modernisation had caused animals' habitat to be closer to man.

"We set the condition and scenery that caused this to happen. Emerging diseases are due to human activities, intervention and movement," he said.

"We must have the maturity

and foresight to understand what will happen to the ecology and how it can cause diseases when we conduct development," said Prof Mackenzie, who is the Premier's Fellow and Professor of Tropical and Emerging Infectious Diseases in the division of health sciences, Curtin University of Technology, Australia.

His contribution includes his work on the ecology, epidemiology, pathogenesis and aspects of molecular biology of many Australasian mosquito-borne viruses.

His research team was the first to link the Australian Hendra virus, which is closely related to the Nipah virus, to fruit bats as its reservoir.