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Learn to deal with new diseases, doctors told

PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. - The medical profession must learn how to deal with new diseases as existing medicines and precautions are not capable of handling all new outbreaks, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

The Prime Minister said the medical fraternity should put extra effort into the research and development of new vaccines, while trying to understand the new diseases and the ways to contain them.

"It may be easy for you to deal with known diseases as you have an armoury of medicines and precautions, but to treat some new disease you would not know what will happen to you.

"Maybe an infected person staring at you might cause you to be infected ... we never know," he said in his brief speech at a dinner in conjunction with the 43rd Malaysian Medical Association annual general meeting here.

Also present were the Prime Minister's wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and MMA president Datuk Dr N. Athimulam.

Dr Mahathir said the mutation of viruses and bacteria had given birth to all kinds of new diseases that were not known about 50 years ago, but the methods and precautions used to treat or contain such diseases had not changed.

"For instance, we quarantine people to monitor a certain disease, but as we are not sure how the disease is transmitted, in the process of quarantine we might actually facilitate others (quarantined together with one or two carriers) to be infected.

"Actually it's a dilemma because the old ways are not effective anymore."

During his speech, Dr Mahathir again lauded doctors, nurses and other medical staff who risked their lives to treat Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome patients and contain the disease.

He said while many doctors and nurses (in other countries) had themselves become victims of SARS, those in Malaysia executed their responsibility without any qualms.

"The Government recognises your sacrifice," he said.