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New lab to carry out research on killer diseases

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ALOR STAR, Fri. - Malaysia will be able to carry out its own research on killer diseases with the setting up of a new P3-rated research laboratory in Sungai Buloh, Selangor, next year.

To be called the National Public Health Enhanced P3 Laboratory, it will be headed by the man who discovered the nipah virus, Professor Dr Chua Kaw Bing.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said the new laboratory would be the second research facility to be set up after the first at the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur.

He said the laboratory at the IMR, which was set up one-and-a-half years ago, had been instrumental in helping health authorities identify the SARS virus.

Previously, he said such tests would have to be sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the United States, or to the Animal Research Lab in Australia.

"The new lab in Sungai Buloh will be the best in the country in terms of facilities," Chua said.

The minister explained that the classification of P3 indicated the level of bio-safety adopted by the facility in maintaining safety when conducting research on these killer viruses and microbes. He said the Cabinet had recently approved an additional allocation of RM5 million to upgrade the facilities at the proposed laboratory.

However, he was unable to give the total cost for the project.

"The plans have been drawn up and we have asked the Public Works Department, which is undertaking the project, to start as soon as possible," he said after visiting SARS-related facilities at Alor Star Hospital here today.

"We are hoping for the lab to start operation next year."

Chua said Sungai Buloh was chosen as the site for the new laboratory as it would be working closely with the new and modern hospital there.

"Hospital Sungai Buloh will not only be high-tech, it will also be the centre of infectious diseases and the two centres will be working closely in the fight to identify the new strains and look for new vaccines," he said.

Chua said there were also plans by Universiti Malaya to set up its own research laboratory.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the SARS outbreak has shown the urgent need to have such facilities.

Chua said the Government was also looking into the setting up its own P-4 research laboratory here although it would require more skilled and qualified personnel.