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RUANGAN : NEWS WITHOUT BORDERS

Fighting Covid-19 war in the lab

Varsity examines, tracks killer organisms that cause infectious diseases to contain outbreaks

KUCHING: It is like a scene from *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. The immaculately placed microscopes, petri dishes and test tubes are a familiar sight for fans of the American forensics crime drama series.

But instead of solving murder cases, this laboratory at the Institute of Health and Community Medicine (IHCM) in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak looks for significantly tinier killers – organisms that cause infectious diseases.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 a year ago, IHCM has been at the forefront of the campaign to contain the infection.

Its work on testing samples and genome sequencing to detect changes in the virus has led to the discovery of two variants of the Covid-19 virus that are different from the one found in Sarawak during the outbreak's initial stage in March last year.

The new strains are similar to the ones found in Indonesia and the United Kingdom, but there is no evidence they are more infectious.

The discovery of the new variants underlines the importance of constant genome surveillance, said IHCM director Prof Dr David Perera.

"We need to know if the virus is changing and, if it does, where the changes are because they affect the efficacy of the vaccine.

"There will then be a potential for the vaccine to fail, which means, we may not get the protection we need (even with the vaccine)."

Perera explained that some of the Covid-19 vaccines now only target certain proteins in the virus and, if a mutation occurs, it will weaken the effect of these vaccines like what happened in the South Africa strain.

"So, we need to track changes in the virus for at least the next one to two years as long as we still have positive (Covid-19) cases."

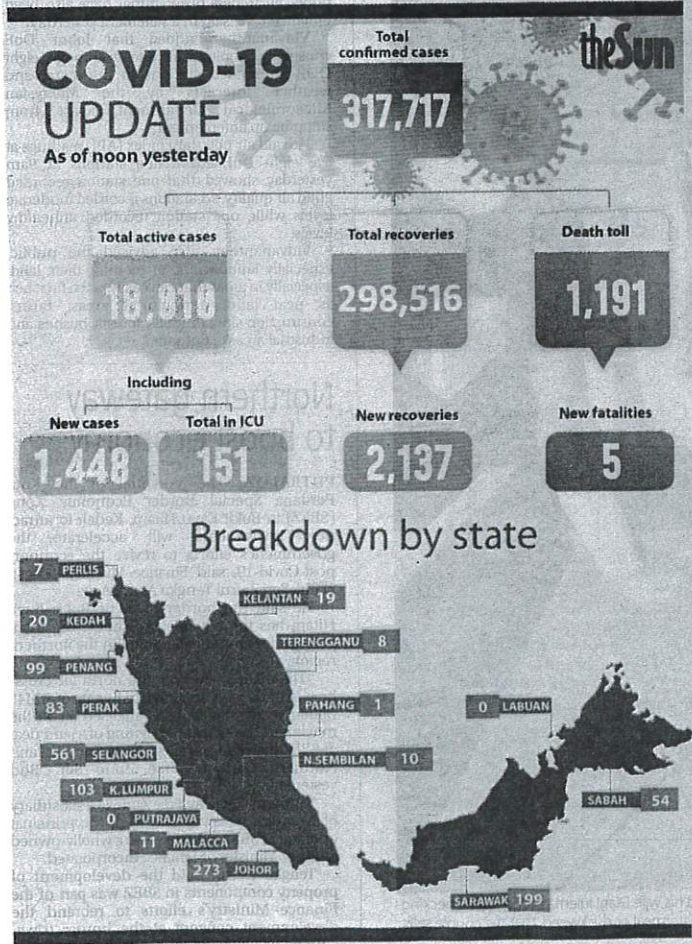
IHCM, which has four researchers and 20 staff, also plays an important role in responding to any viral outbreak in Sarawak, like the measles outbreak some time ago.

Perera told Bernama scientists are globally looking at different variants of the virus as huge numbers of Covid-19 genome sequences are being submitted daily through online data-sharing platforms like Gisaid.

Gisaid is an online initiative that promotes rapid sharing of data on flu viruses, including the coronavirus that causes Covid-19. Through these collective depositories, researchers from all over the world can see the origins of a particular virus and how it keeps changing.

"That's how we are able to tell, for example, that the virus we found (in February) is related to the UK variant that was exported to Indonesia and became a prevalent strain there.

"There are six to seven entities in Malaysia that have contributed to the depositories. IHCM is among the three biggest contributors from the country," he said.



Poisonous substances found in cosmetic cream

KUALA LUMPUR: The FS Turmeric Cream, a cosmetic product to treat pimples and acne scars, has been found to contain mercury and betamethasone 17-valerate, which are harmful to health.

Health Director-General Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said in a statement yesterday the notification of the cosmetic product has been cancelled by the Pharmaceutical Services director of the Health Ministry and is not allowed to be sold in the country.

"Mercury is prohibited in cosmetic products because it is harmful to health. When absorbed into the body, mercury can cause damage to the kidney and nervous system.

"The substance can also affect the development of the brain in infants as well as cause rashes, irritation and changes to the skin. The people are advised not to use the cosmetic product."

He said the cream also contained betamethasone 17-valerate, which is a medicine registered with the drug control

authority, and can only be used on the advice of a health professional.

The substance can cause side effects such as thinning of the skin, irritation, or risk being absorbed into the blood stream.

He said retailers and distributors of the cosmetic product have to remove the item from their shelves immediately.

Selling and distributing the product would be a violation of the Control of Drugs and Cosmetics Regulations 1984.

Individuals infringing the regulation can be fined not more than RM25,000 or jailed not more than three years or both for the first offence and fined not more than RM50,000 or jail not more than five years or both for the subsequent offences.

Members of the public are encouraged to check the notification status of a cosmetic product by surfing official National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency's (NPRA) website at www.npra.gov.my or download the application of NPRA Product Status application available on Google Play Store.

- Bernama