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General

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Dengue Fever Researcher Is Inaugural PM Malaysia Scholar

By Neville D'Cruz

SYDNEY, April 8 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi Friday announced that Universiti Malaya immunologist Wong Sook-San is the inaugural University of Melbourne-Prime Minister of Malaysia Scholar.

The prime minister, who is on a three-day visit to Australia, announced the award of the scholarship on behalf of the University of Melbourne at a ceremony organised by the university's Asialink Centre here.

Wong, who is doing her Master of Medical Science degree at Universiti Malaya, has a research background in dengue fever viruses, particularly dengue virus type 2.

The scholarship, a joint initiative of the university and its alumni in Malaysia, is intended to support emerging academic talent in Malaysia in key areas of national



Universiti Malaya immunologist Wong Sook-San is the Inaugural University of Melbourne-Prime Minister of Malaysia Scholar.

importance.

It covers tuition and a living allowance for an early career Malaysian researcher to undertake PhD studies at Melbourne in the fields of either engineering, science or in medical and health sciences.

Wong told the University of Melbourne media unit from Kuala Lumpur that she was excited and proud to receive the award, which will allow her to research the development of a vaccine to combat the disease.

Dengue fever is an infectious disease carried by mosquitoes and caused by any of four related viruses that affect millions of people globally. All four types of the virus are endemic in Malaysia.

Wong said the viruses were capable of causing cyclic outbreaks, resulting in a substantial health and economic burden in Malaysia, and that the disease was potentially fatal when it manifested as haemorrhage or shock in sufferers.

Victims of the disease can suffer infection from any of the four viruses over a lifetime, although immunity to each virus results from previous infection.

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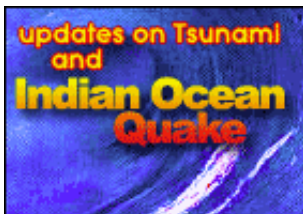
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She said there were no approved dengue vaccines or therapeutic treatments available, and patients often rely solely on supportive treatment for recovery (bed rest, anti-fever medicines and fluids).

"In addition, severe dengue virus infection is caused by a phenomenon known as antibody-dependent enhancement, in which existing dengue antibodies from a previous infection worsen the subsequent infection by another dengue virus type," she said.

"Because of this, development of a vaccine is hampered by the potential danger of causing severe secondary dengue virus infection. A safe and effective vaccine that will target all four types of dengue viruses and not cause infection is urgently needed," she said.

Wong explained that her proposed PhD research would focus on developing a "dendritic cell based dengue vaccine". Dendritic cells (DCs) are a subset of cells that allow the T or B immune cells to recognise pathogens and respond with antigens.

"DC vaccines have the advantage over their genetic counterparts of specificity. "That means that they have the ability to effect a targeted immune response," she said.

A Bachelor of Biomedical Science graduate of Universiti Malaya, Wong is already familiar with Australia through a research attachment in molecular virology at the Queensland University of Technology in 2003.

University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Professor Glyn Davis congratulated Wong on her award.

The university was delighted that the prime minister had selected such a promising researcher to receive the inaugural scholarship in his name, he said.

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