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Childhood obesity a growing health concern in Malaysia

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KUCHING: Childhood obesity has become a growing concern in the country due to the rapid economic development, lifestyle and changes in non-communicable diseases.

In Sarawak, studies indicate a prevalence of six to nine per cent of overweight and obesity among both urban and rural children, with a higher rate among boys.

According to a study carried out among primary school pupils in Kuching City, the prevalence of overweight and obesity was reported at 18.2 per cent and 15.2 per cent respectively, with the highest prevalence among Iban and Bidayuh children.

However, statistics on younger children among other major ethnic groups is comparatively fewer, although, there is an indication that such a trend is also found in rural Sarawak, particularly areas closer to towns.

The research titled 'Improving health energy balance – and obesity-related behaviours among pre-schools in Malaysia: Feasibility of adapting the ToyBox Study' was awarded a research grant from the Newton-Ungku Omar Fund.

Its co-researcher from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) Associate Professor Dr Cheah Whye Lian said the feasibility of adapting a kindergarten-based family-involved intervention programme from Europe to Malaysia was aimed at preventing early childhood obesity.

Cheah said the target groups would be teachers, children and parents who would have to inculcate healthier habits and



(From left) Kopli, Kadim, Gibson, Poh and Essau look at the ToyBox project documents. — Photo by Chimon Upon

behaviours in terms of drinking, snacking, physical activities and sedentary behaviours.

"Such phenomenon is not uncommon as more and more children are indulged in sedentary lifestyle due to many factors," she said when met by reporters after paying a courtesy call on Unimas deputy vice-chancellor (Research and Innovation) Prof Dr Kopli Bujang recently.

The ToyBox project researchers comprise experts from Unimas, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Roehampton University and Durham University in the United Kingdom.

The Newton-Ungku Omar

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Associate Professor Dr Cheah Whye Lian, co-researcher from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas)

Fund is a 375 million pound fund which, through science and innovation partnerships, promotes the economic development and welfare of poor people in partnering countries.

It aims to strengthen science

and innovation capacity and unlock further funding to support poverty alleviation. It is delivered through 15 UK delivery partners in collaboration with 15 partner countries, to collaborate on development topics, and to create collaborative solutions to development challenges and strengthening innovation systems.

Unimas vice-chancellor Prof Dato Dr Mohamad Kadim Suardi, representatives from Roehampton University Dr Edward Leigh Gibson and Prof Dr Cecelia Essau, and Prof Dr Poh Bee Koon from UKM were also present during the visit.