

# Unimas scientists close to identifying killer virus

By Frankie L Labang

KUCHING - A virologist and a team of three scientist from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) Institute of Health and Community Medicine (IHCM) are still conducting research to identify the killer virus that killed 31 children last year.

The director of the IHCM, 45-year-old virologist, Professor Dr Mary Jane Cardoso, said yesterday that the team was close to achieving a breakthrough in identifying the deadly virus.

She disclosed that the team had isolated and cloned the viral genome, and that part of the viral DNA sequence had been determined. "We are very excited on the findings and hope to carry out more tests."

Professor Dr Cardoso estimated it would take several more months to correctly identify the virus so that deaths could be prevented should another outbreak occur.

She revealed that the IHCM laboratory had recruited eight postgraduate

students who were keen to carry out more research into the mysterious virus.

A chemist, Encik Donald Yapp, who completed post-doctorate at Washington University in St Louis, United States, and McGill University in Montreal, Canada, had recently joined the laboratory.

A local research team had initially identified the virus as a coxsackie virus, first identified by US scientists in the 1940s. But some of the symptoms were not characteristic of coxsackie, and the virus was never found in the victims.

Recently, the State government set aside RM500,000 for IHCM to continue its ongoing studies.

Last Sunday, the director-general of Health, Tan Sri Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman, disclosed that no definite conclusion had been reached on the exact cause of death of the 31 children although several virus related to deaths have been identified.

Tan Sri Dr Suleiman revealed that although deaths



**EXCITING FINDINGS** ... Professor Dr Mary Jane Cardoso (left) and Professor Dato' Zawawi Ismail, vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, revealing that Unimas is close to identifying the mysterious killer virus but more researches need to be carried out.

PHOTOGRAPH: TH LU

from Enterovirus 71 infections were not a usual feature in most outbreaks, a

significant number of deaths resulting from this virus infection had also

been reported in outbreaks in Bulgaria in 1975 and Hungary in 1978.