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Tajuk : 300 attend public lecture on malaria

## 300 attend public lecture on malaria

BY JULIE NGADAN

**KUCHING:** The Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) yesterday hosted the public lecture by Prof. Dr. Balbir Singh at Pustaka Negeri Sarawak in Petra Jaya here.

Nearly 300 people attended the public lecture which discussed the M&Ms: Malaria, Man, Monkeys and Mosquitoes.

Malaria in humans was thought to be caused by four species of *Plasmodium*, until the landmark discovery by Balbir and his team that there was a fifth species, *P. knowlesi*, commonly found in monkeys, that could be transmitted to humans.

Balbir, who has been a "malaria detective" for almost three decades, talked about how his team had used molecular tools to discover monkey malaria in humans, how they demonstrated

that infections originated from monkeys and also the work they undertook to identify the mosquitoes that were responsible for transmitting *P. knowlesi* to humans.

"Our research has indicated that *knowlesi malaria* is a significant, life-threatening zoonotic disease, thereby radically changing our understanding of human malaria.

"These findings of the 'fifth human malaria parasite' has resulted not only in the rewriting of medical textbooks but has changed the way infections diagnosed as *P. malariae* by microscopy are treated.

"Previously, *P. knowlesi malaria* was wrongly diagnosed and treated as the benign *P. malariae malaria* since both species of *Plasmodium* appear identical under the microscope.

"However, due to the rapid multiplication of *P. knowlesi* in

the blood (24 hours compared with 72 hours for *P. malariae*) and the potential to cause severe malaria and death, these patients are now recognised as having *knowlesi malaria* and are treated and managed more urgently," he explained, adding that this change in treatment and management policy had resulted in the saving of more lives, especially in Sarawak and Sabah where *P. knowlesi* was now the most common cause of human malaria.

Balbir, who is the founding director of the Malaria Research Centre (MRC), UNIMAS, obtained his BSc, MSc and PhD degrees from the University of Liverpool (1976-1984). His interest in malaria began at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine when he initially worked as a Postdoctoral Research Assistant and later as a Beit Medical Fellow.

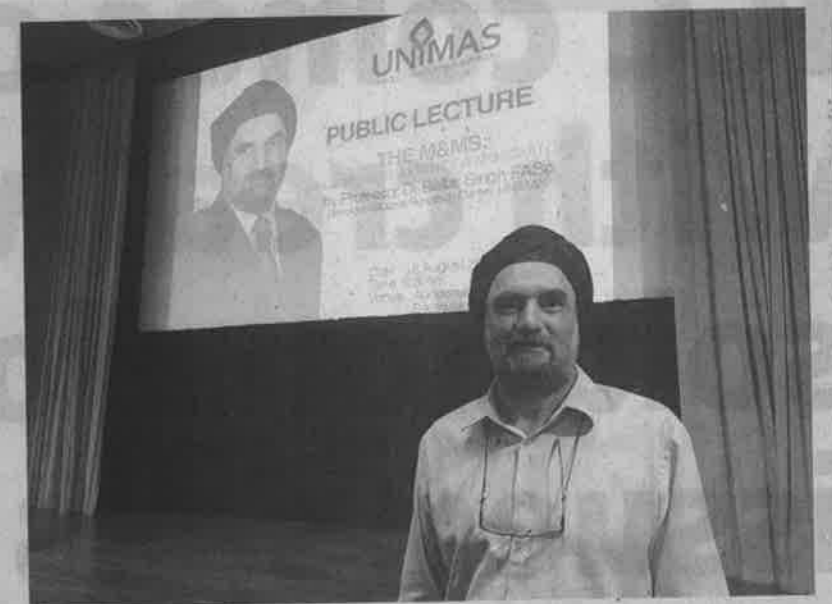
He returned to Malaysia in 1992 and was a lecturer at Universiti

Sains Malaysia for seven years before moving to UNIMAS in 1999. His research was aimed at obtaining a greater understanding of the epidemiology, evolutionary history and pathophysiology of malaria.

Research at the MRC, UNIMAS has been funded by local and international funding agencies including the Wellcome Trust, UK. His research has been published in leading international journals and his publications have been cited 2,929 times with an h-index of 27.

His team's work on *knowlesi malaria* has attracted considerable media attention and was featured in a documentary by ABC Australia and in a news report by Al Jazeera.

Balbir has also been invited to speak at numerous conferences in Europe, USA, Canada and Australasia to review research grant applications from the UK



PROF. Dr. Balbir Singh poses for the media after his public lecture.

and Australia and to review manuscripts for publication from 23 international journals.

He was also the local secretary for Malaysia, for the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, UK (1994-2007) and has served as an advisor to the World Health Organisation.

His contributions to science in Malaysia were recognised by the Academy of Sciences Malaysia when they selected him as one of the Top Research Scientists Malaysia in 2012 and invited him to become a Fellow of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia in 2015.