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Medical community all excited

New research findings could significantly improve diagnosis of melioidosis

By YU JI

yuji@thestar.com.my

KUCHING: New research findings on melioidosis that will be unveiled next week at a workshop in Miri could significantly improve the diagnosis of the deadly disease endemic in Sarawak.

Last year, some 40 cases were reported in the state causing one death.

However, the year before that, there were 121 cases and 11 deaths reported. The medical community believes real world figures are higher due to under diagnosis.

Soon to be unveiled research findings also point to the strain of melioidosis in Sarawak to be different from elsewhere.

"What is being described in text-

books is not what is actually happening in Sarawak," said Yuwana Podin, a scientist with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas), who is taking her doctorate course at Menzies School of Health Research in Australia.

"The findings will affect the lab diagnosis of the bacteria that causes melioidosis. When misdiagnosed — causing the wrong drug to be prescribed — it affects the patient's chance of recovery."

Yuwana said her findings had "created some excitement" in the medical community. The scientist has been teaching and conducting research at Unimas' Institute of Health and Community Medicine since 1999.

Her research is jointly funded by Unimas and the Australian universi-

ty based in Northern Territories. The forum, which Yuwana is an organiser, is funded by the Australia-Malaysia Institute and Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The workshop in Miri is aimed at public health personnel, clinicians, laboratory technicians from hospitals from Sarawak and Sabah. Yuwana said some 60 healthcare professionals would attend.

Through the workshop from Sept 9 to 11, Yuwana hoped for better disease detection and treatment.

Melioidosis is largely confined to rural areas, typically affecting individuals with high exposure to water and soil.

In places like Myanmar and Thailand, where thousands are diag-

nosed every year, melioidosis is known as the "Padi Farmer's Disease".

Closer to home, infections are known in Kapit and cases have been also reported among those in and around the Bakun hydroelectric plant.

In 2011, the state Health Department said it was trying to raise awareness of the disease, including by telling locals with constant exposure to soil and water to seek immediate treatment at health clinics when they have cuts or wounds.

Back then, the department recorded two clusters of higher-than-average melioidosis infection sites — one is the area surrounding the Bakun dam, the other is at logging camps in Kapit.