

UNIMAS SCIENTIST RECEIVES AWARD FOR KNOWLESI MALARIA RESEARCH

UNIVERSITI Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) Malaria Research Centre director Prof Dr Balbir Singh's research on Knowlesi Malaria has been recognised when he was named among 27 Malaysian scientists to receive the Academy of Sciences Malaysia "Top Research Scientist Malaysia Awards" recently.

According to the academy, the scientists were selected based on their active involvement in research for the last five years with at least 10 years of cumulative contribution towards the progress of science, technology and innovation (STI) based on knowledge generation, knowledge dissemination and impact of research output.

"It was a great honour to be recognised as one of the top research scientists in the country by the Academy of Sciences Malaysia but that recognition must also go to the Unimas research team at the Malaria Research Centre, that has worked hard to translate research ideas into publications in leading international journals," he said in a statement issued by Unimas.

He was grateful for their significant contributions and also for grants from Unimas, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and the Wellcome Trust United Kingdom that enabled research on Plasmodium Knowlesi to be undertaken. Plasmodium Knowlesi is a monkey Malaria parasite that was thought to rarely infect humans until Prof Balbir's team reported in *The Lancet* in 2004 of a large number of human cases in the Kapit Division.

This discovery and subsequent work on clinical and epidemiological aspects of Knowlesi Malaria has revealed that it was widely distributed in Malaysia and other countries in Southeast Asia and can cause death. It has resulted in P. Knowlesi being recognised as the fifth cause of human Malaria, prompting the World Health Organization to convene a meeting in February 2011 to discuss the public health implications of Knowlesi Malaria.

The research on Knowlesi Malaria conducted by staff at the Malaria Research Centre has received extensive international press attention from leading broadcasters including the BBC and Reuters besides being featured in a television documentary by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Prof Balbir said the work on Knowlesi Malaria has impacted on the way patients with this potentially fatal infection are treated and managed, particularly in Sarawak and Sabah, where it accounted for between 50 to 90 percent of Malaria patients at certain hospitals.

Previously, Knowlesi Malaria was identified and treated as the benign *Malariae* Malaria, since both species of parasites are identical under the microscope, he said, but policy changed arising from the pioneering work on Knowlesi Malaria at Unimas had meant that these cases were being treated and managed as for severe *falciparum* Malaria, previously considered as the most deadly of the human Malarias. Other research clusters in Unimas has also been urged to emulate his success story based on the Malaria Research Centre's research, which has had a significant health impact, by saving lives of people from rural communities. -*Bernama*