ARE WE READY FOR NEW OUTBREAKS?

COVID-19 is the third coronavirus to emerge in the human population in the past two decades. What is clear is that new and emerging diseases are just lurking around the corner and waiting to appear when the right environment is present. There are many examples of human disease related to the health of animals and the environment. Although initial reports of Covid-19 is less pathogenic than MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV, the virus emergence raises questions on our readiness to contain emerging diseases and prevent a large-scale spread from causing a pandemic.

Finding a solution for this difficult task requires integration of human-animal-environment health policies and actions with a goal to achieve optimal health outcomes. This emerging collaborative field integrates knowledge from human health, animal health, environmental health and agriculture. In the event of an epidemic, the disease is managed properly through a large-scale comprehensive prevention and control approach through mobilisation involving multi-sectorial agencies, private sectors, professional bodies and civil societies. This approach is gaining traction to cope with addressing complex problems such as emerging zoonotic diseases.

China’s effort to combat this virus is commendable and can be seen at all levels. For example, a 1,000-bed hospital was built in 10 days. The world also saw the mobilisation of manpower to seal off the city of Wuhan and the rest of Hubei. Scientists are working together around the clock to develop a vaccine and seek treatments to make infections less severe. Thousands of doctors and nurses risk their lives working effortlessly to treat patients.

Malaysia may not be so lucky if faced with such adversity. This country is still struggling to control diseases such as dengue, leptospirosis and rabies. In order to find a solution, all stakeholders, including clinicians, scientists, veterinarians and ecologists, must work together with government ministries to come up with practical solutions to combat new and emerging diseases. Efforts must range from mobilising manpower to controlling, monitoring, managing surveillance, coming up with rapid diagnostic solutions and activating response systems, etc.

This realisation has led the Malaysian Society of Parasitology and Tropical Medicine (MSPTM) to create a platform for scientists, physicians, veterinarians and many others to share their work at the 56th MSPTM conference themed “Neglected Tropical and Vector Borne Diseases: The evolution of One Health from Challenges to Solutions”.

This event will be held on March 11 and 12 at Istana Hotel, Kuala Lumpur. Renowned local speakers and from abroad will share their experiences in this event to showcase the successes of this model.

Prof Rosina Kreek, a keynote speaker from the US, will talk on “How a One Health Approach Mitigates Neglected Tropical Diseases” and will underline the model step by step. Another eminent speaker, Prof Banchob Sripan, will demonstrate the success of the One Health approach through the Lawa Model in reducing the mortality of river fluke disease in Thailand.

In addition, the Faculty of Science of Universiti Malaya is organising a public talk on this topic on March 19 at the Faculty of Science, Lecture Hall Complex.

It is hoped that through this sharing platform we are able to monitor and control public health threats and learn about how diseases spread among people, animals and the environment to enhance our public health outcome and strengthen our readiness against future outbreaks.

For more information, visit http://msptm.org.

ASSOCIATE PROF DR SITI NURSHEENA MOHD ZAIN
President, 56th MSPTM Council