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Seeking novel solutions to health problems



CAN tomatoes be taught to make antiviral drugs for people who eat them? Would zapping your skin with a laser make your vaccination work better? Could malaria-carrying mosquitoes be given a teensy head cold that would prevent them from sniffing out a human snack bar?

These are among 81 projects awarded US\$100,000 (RM355,000) grants recently by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in a bid to support innovative, unconventional global health research.

The five-year health research grants are designed to encourage scientists to pursue bold ideas that could lead to breakthroughs, focusing on ways to prevent and treat infectious diseases, such as HIV, malaria, tuberculosis, pneumonia and diarrhoeal diseases.

The foundation said grant recipient Eric Lam at Rutgers University in New Jersey was exploring tomatoes as a antiviral

drug delivery system.

Researchers at the University of Exeter in Devon, England, will seek to build an inexpensive instrument to diagnose malaria by using magnets to detect the waste products of the malaria parasite in human blood.

Mei Wu at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School will be getting a grant to see if shooting a laser at a person's skin before administering a vaccine can enhance immune response.

And Thomas Baker at Pennsylvania State University wants to see if malaria-carrying mosquitoes can be infected with a fungus that would act like a cold, suppressing the sense of smell that they use to find people as sources of blood.

The foundation also announced plans Monday to spend US\$73 million over the next five years to help small farmers in impoverished countries.

That program was outlined by foundation chief executive of-

ficer Jeff Raikes at a water conference held at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Raikes, a former Microsoft Corp executive, said spending on agriculture in sub-Saharan African countries, where the foundation focuses much of its poverty-fighting efforts, accounts for less than five per cent of their total government budgets. And from 1985 to 2005, spending as a percentage of government budgets decreased in donor countries, he said, including the United States.

The agriculture grants include US\$40 million over five years to develop drought-tolerant corn, US\$13 million over four for more efficient irrigation, and US\$10 million over four years to help women develop education and training programs related to agriculture.

The largest philanthropic foundation in the world, the Gates Foundation gave out US\$2.8 billion last year. It had said payouts this year would

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grow by about 10 per cent, less than previously planned, because of the troubled economy.

The foundation was started in 1994 by Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and his wife and has the international goals of overcoming hunger, poverty and disease. In the US, its focus is on education, which receives about a quarter of its grant dollars. — AP