

Headline **Taming tuberculosis**  
Date **25 Mar 2010**  
MediaTitle **New Straits Times**  
Section **Local News**  
Journalist **N/A**  
Frequency **Daily**  
Circ / Read **139,763 / 330,000**

Language **English**  
Page No **16**  
Article Size **129 cm<sup>2</sup>**  
Color **Black/white**  
ADValue **1,786**  
PRValue **5,358**



# Taming tuberculosis

TUBERCULOSIS is certainly not the old nemesis it used to be when it was the No. 1 cause of death in the country. But it's hardly a disease of the past with only a passing historical significance, like smallpox, polio or leprosy, when it has by no means been completely tamed. Though the national tuberculosis control programme is almost half a century old, and despite the universal use of BCG vaccination and antibiotic remedies, TB has refused to disappear from our list of contagious diseases. While the ancient disease has been pushed out of the top 10 cause of death by younger, modern lifestyle upstarts like heart attacks, cancer, diabetes and stroke, it is now the No. 1 killer among infectious diseases, and has been so for many years now. After starting to decline in the 1960s, it started to rise again in the mid-'90s. There were over 17,000 TB cases in 2008 compared to more than 49,000 cases for dengue, the worst in the nation's history. But more people were consumed by consumption — more than 1,500 — than those who died from dengue — over 110.

Fortunately, multidrug resistant TB, a form of the disease that can no longer be treated with the standard drugs regime and which has become widespread in many parts of the world, is not common in Malaysia — less than five per cent, according to the health minister on World Stop TB Day on Tuesday. Unfortunately, the development of new drugs has stagnated, and the current course of treatment is so long and unpalatable that one in 10 abandons treatment. As antibiotic resistance is a cardinal rule of biology, at a time when the disease shows no signs of a decline in the country, it becomes even more imperative to strengthen supervision of the DOTS programme to make sure the patient takes the bitter medicine continuously for six months as recommended to reduce the likelihood of the emergence of resistant strains of the disease.

Unfortunately, too, HIV, which is still raging, has provided the impetus for consumption's conspicuous comeback in this country. The other threat comes from foreign workers, particularly those who escape the mandatory health screening because they are illegal, who have brought their infections with them. Fortunately, Malaysia has vast experience in controlling this old enemy and many other infectious diseases. We are also better armed with scientific knowledge, preventive measures, diagnostic capacity, and curative treatment. But we need to act now and treat TB as the serious health problem that it is right to the end to bring it under control.