

Headline	Malaysia's role in seeking solution to neglected diseases		
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# Malaysia's role in seeking solution to neglected diseases

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Human African Trypanosomiasis, Chagas, Paediatric HIV, Leishmaniasis and Malaria are diseases that contribute to the mortality and morbidity of millions of people in the poorer parts of the world.

Yet, they are considered neglected diseases when it comes to developing drugs to treat them.

As developing effective drugs involves high costs and resources, most pharmaceutical players shy away from developing drugs for these diseases, especially knowing that their target markets are the poorer nations and communities - Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

Neglected diseases are a source of tremendous suffering.

More than half a million people die annually due to them and the millions who survive suffer from disfigurement, stunted growth and development, adverse outcomes of pregnancy and reduced reproductive capability.

Thus, for saving humanity from these neglected diseases, a group of compassionate nations and parties founded the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi) in 2003.

Malaysia is one of the founding partners of DNDi along with Medicins San Frontieres (Doctors without Borders), Brazil's Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, Kenya's Medical Research Institute, India's Institute for Medical Research, Institute Pasteur France and World Health Organisation's (WHO) Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (WHO/TDR).

Being a not-for-profit research and development organisation through the public-private partnership model, DNDi aims to develop safe, effective and affordable medicines for diseases that afflict the most neglected people in the world.

Malaysia and several founding member organisations were recently given the honour to initi-

ate DNDi's year long celebration to commemorate a decade of research milestones.

Malaysia's former Health Director-General, Tan Sri Mohd Ismail Merican, a founding member of DNDi, told Bernama during the launch of the celebration in October that while DNDi's main executive office is in Geneva, Malaysia through Universiti Sains Malaysia plays host to the Asian regional office.

During the event in Kuala Lumpur, DNDi showcased its achievements in the first decade by launching a new anti-malarial drug Artesunate-Mefloquine (AS-MQ FDC).

DNDi's anti-malarial drug is seen as a major milestone in the initiative to combat malaria, one of the neglected diseases that is still a major public health concern. DNDi noted that malaria threatens approximately 3.3 billion people - half of the world's population in 106 endemic countries.

At the launch, Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai said the AS-MQ FDC fixed-dose combination is the most recent initiative towards combating malaria in the poorer regions of the world.

"This drug has been developed through a unique partnership model, whereby researchers from Brazil, France, United Kingdom, Thailand and Malaysia through Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and the Institute for Medical Research contributed towards its development."

"This is a good example of South-South Collaboration and I am pleased that we, in Malaysia, are able to play a significant role in the development of this new product which has been approved by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for the treatment of malaria."

"I believe that this is the first product pre-qualified by WHO, where Malaysian research data contributed substantially to the regulatory dossier," he said.

The AS-MQ FDC requires malaria patients to take one tablet daily for three days to complete treatment.

This is much more convenient compared with the present malaria treatment which requires patients to take more than one tablet up to 14 days.

Liow added that the Malaysian National Pharmaceutical Control Bureau not only approved the product but also played a leading role to facilitate AS-MQ FDC's registration amongst Asean countries.

Meanwhile, DNDi noted that AS-MQ FDC offered an easy to use, effective therapy for uncomplicated malaria for patients in areas where the combination of AS and MQ is recommended.

Together with diagnosis and vector control tools, the drug represents a key element in the anti-malaria arsenal. DNDi highlighted that the AS-MQ FDC is now used to treat over half of all malaria cases in Brazil.

On the malaria situation in Malaysia, Liow said the country has successfully reduced the malaria incidence from 318.6 per 100,000 people in 1980 to 18.6 per 100,000 last year.

"However, we are aware of the potential threats and challenges to total elimination including strains from the malaria endemic neighbouring countries, particularly the multi-drug resistant strains from Myanmar and Thailand."

"Some 21.9 per cent of cases in 2011 were imported. Malaria-free areas in the rural regions are still largely vulnerable because of the presence of the mosquito vector. We hope that with the new fixed-dose combination treatment of AS-MQ FDC, we will be able to achieve better success rates in treating this disease," he added.

Liow praised the significant commitment and contributions made by DNDi towards the treatment and control of neglected diseases in lower income nations.

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The Malaysian Government will continue to support DNDi in its noble efforts to improve the quality of life for people in the poorest countries of the world.  
- Bernama