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State to set up S'wak Research Council for collaboration on R&D

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KUCHING: The state government will establish the Sarawak Research Council as a platform for all agencies, institutions and industry players to network and collaborate with each other on research and development (R&D) as well as the commercialisation of biotechnology.

In disclosing this, Assistant Minister of Education and Technological Research Dr Annuar Rapaee said a Bill to establish this council is expected be tabled during the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) sitting in November this year.

"The objective is to consolidate all the researchers and agencies as well as academic institutions and industries in Sarawak to have a network, sit down together to collaborate in terms of biotechnology in the State of Sarawak to see how we can find something or products that are able to be commercialised," he told reporters at a press conference after officiating at Bioborneo and Bioeconomy Day 2017 organised by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (Mosti) at a hotel here yesterday.

Dr Annuar, who was Assistant Minister of Science Research and Biotechnology prior to the state cabinet reshuffle on Sunday, said the state government had agreed for the Bill to be tabled in the DUN.

"About a month ago, the Chief Minister (Datuk Amar Abang Johari Tun Openg) and I went to Cambridge, UK and we agreed that we have to work together with the biotechnology clusters in Cambridge which they are well known for (and) to gather particularly all the agencies in Sarawak to see how we can work together to benefit in terms of R&D and biotechnology.

"We have also done a few workshops and meetings on Sarawak Research Council."

Dr Annuar said currently, there is still no platform for the agencies, academic institutions and industry players to collaborate to ensure there is no duplication in terms of research works and also to commercialise all the end products of the research.

"There is no point for us to have a lot of research but it does not come to the market and benefit the people at large. Therefore, research must be able not only to improve the people's livelihood but to improve the nation's economy in terms of products that will be produced from R&D."

On the structure of the Sarawak Research Council, Dr Annuar said there will be different units that will be categorised based on the type of research such as agriculture, crops, biomass and bio-engineering.

"Of course, between these categories, there will be different players who are involved. All the different agencies which have interest in R&D will be involved in the research council."

However, he said it is quite premature to reveal who the members of the council are since the research council has not been formed yet.

"The cabinet has just been reshuffled, so we still do not know who will lead the council. This work has been done before the cabinet reshuffle, and we have agreed that it has to be tabled in DUN."

Meanwhile, Dr Annuar said the trials performed on a synthetic drug from an anti-HIV compound which is Calanolide A produced a good result at stage 1A and 1B.

"This is the first synthetic drug produced originally from the Bintagor tree. And we are praying hard so that (it passes) Stage Two and Three before getting approval from FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) to be marketed as one of the first synthetic drugs ever to be produced in Malaysia."

Dr Annuar explained that before the drug can be used or commercialised, it has to go through different stages.

"Firstly, it has to be tested in the laboratory on whether that compound is effective against the HIV virus. After it is found to be effective, we need to test whether there is toxicity or side effects and then we try on animals. This is what we call pre-clinical trials.

"After that, it has to go through four stages before you and me can take it if we have HIV. But the most important thing of this finding is that we are up to Stage 1A and 1B at the moment.

"In other words, we have come to a stage where we have used this drug to treat a native patient — the patient that has HIV but is not on treatment yet and the other is a normal patient. This is to look at its effectiveness on humans as well as the side effects on humans."

After that, he said it will go through two other stages of trials, with the difference in the

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number of patients.

"The other one is the controlled group which means we have to give patients who are having HIV placebo, which means it is not a real drug but we give to the patients to see the effect.

"Only when the results are positive, then we can get approval from FDA for the drug to be consumed and commercialised. We still have a long way to go."