

PANDEMIC A WAKE-UP CALL



THERE are still many viruses and microbes waiting to be released from their natural habitats such as untouched forest areas.

As we continue to disturb their natural habitats, they will be unleashed, creating another socially and economically disruptive pandemic like what we are facing now.

Everyone now recognises the urgency to be prepared for a pandemic. Scientists have warned that Covid-19 is not going to be the last. The outbreak is a wake-up call for the nation on the issue of funding research and development (R&D).

The coming years will see an increase in the funding of R&D for medicine. For years, we have ignored medical research in the country. We need to revisit the entire research funding programme for medical research.

During this pandemic, the areas of medical research which have received the most attention include the development of vaccine and therapy, and public health management.

Epidemiological studies have emerged as another medical research area which should be funded.

I am sure there are others such as the development of medical devices and also the treatment of NCDs (non-communicable diseases) such as cancer and heart ailments.

The entire structure of medical research in the country needs to be reassessed. There should be more collaboration, coordination and sharing among all the research entities.

We cannot afford to go on operating in silos because medical research is not cheap, and all medical research requires a multiprong approach to have the best chance of success.

As we all know, Covid-19 has also proven to be a socio-economic pandemic. Many businesses, big and small, have been badly ravaged. Jobs have been lost. Some predict a rise in global poverty.

Already, governments the world over have put in place socio-economic rescue packages to help cushion the impact.

Vulnerable groups in the country which include the fishing community, the farmers, the small entrepreneurs and the jobless are all at risk.

More than ever, they need social and technological solutions for their woes. In the developed economies, we see farmers and fishermen getting tremendous help to deploy productivity-changing technologies. In the rich countries, developing the appropriate technologies is done by R&D centres. The research projects are funded based on the needs of the target groups.

We do have our own R&D centres but most of them are under-funded. Staff are not adequately motivated. The Malaysian Palm Oil Board may be an exception because it still receives the bulk of research funding from the palm oil industry.

Rubber used to have a similar feedback mechanism. But this has since been dismantled. Instead, researchers were bogged down by work involving properties of the institute, which should be left to the right expertise in the field.

Some of our R&D centres have also been asked to show profits. Naturally, there is no way they can report annual profits like what most businesses do. This demotivates research. Research is for research, not for financial gain.

The best measure of research performance is on the technological solutions they generate for farmers, business groups and other economic entities which are environmentally sustainable.

It is time to stop pressuring R&D centres to show profits. Instead, it is important to appoint leaders who truly understand the R&D community.

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