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## Expert: Get technology, talent and funding first

The Star, Malaysia



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**PETALING JAYA:** With three vaccine projects launched through the National Vaccine Development Plan, an expert says Malaysia needs to acquire the necessary technology, talent and funding first before venturing any further.

Universiti Malaya epidemiologist Prof Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said the amount allocated for the projects were insufficient, pointing out that the country has never developed a vaccine for human diseases.

He said there seemed to be a flurry of activity now in developing multiple vaccines "with funding spread too thin and the aims being rather over-optimistic".

The regulatory framework, he added, also needed to be adjusted to be more facilitating of such work.

Making Malaysia a clinical trial hub in the past had not really worked the way it was intended to, with the country hosting mainly phase three and four clinical trials, rather than the more challenging and groundbreaking phase one and two trials, he added.

"In order for vaccine research to be successful in Malaysia, the government needs to fix a lot of things in the ecosystem and allocate more resources to this kind of research.

"The government must also realise that vaccine research is a long-term game and that there are no short-term gains from this as Malaysia needs to acquire the necessary technology and talent first and these processes take time.

"Otherwise, the vaccine research will peter out and we will not get anything meaningful out of it," Dr Awang Bulgiba said yesterday.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail

Sabri Yaakob announced yesterday that three projects will be launched.

The first will include the development of two types of Covid-19 vaccines using inactivated virus and the mRNA method by the Institute for Medical Research (IMR) with a budget of RM3.5mil from the Health Ministry's research allocation and the Sukuk Prihatin.

The second project is for the development of a cholera vaccine by Universiti Sains Malaysia and Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology, with RM10.5mil in funding from the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry (Mosti).

The third will be the Pre-clinical Evaluation of A Therapeutic Cancer Vaccine for The Treatment of Head and Neck Cancer by the Cancer Research Malaysia, with a funding of RM3mil from Mosti.

Dr Awang Bulgiba, who heads the

Independent Covid-19 Vaccination Advisory Committee, said IMR had no experience developing any vaccine and the messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine technology "is extremely new".

"I cannot see how it can achieve its lofty aims with this amount of funding.

"I am unsure how the figure of RM3.5mil was derived but this is for two different Covid-19 vaccines, one of which will use a very new technology (mRNA) while RM10.5mil has been allocated for the development of just one cholera vaccine, and RM3mil for the head and neck cancer vaccine.

"Even RM10.5mil is a small amount to be spent on a single vaccine as Malaysia has yet to master vaccine technology. Some of the required equipment will need to be procured for the first time.

"To make things worse, the lack of

first-in-human vaccine trials in Malaysia means there is little experience in this kind of work.

"It also means the ecosystem is not yet ready for it and this deficiency needs to be addressed."

Dr Awang Bulgiba said changing the name of the Malaysia Genome Institute (MGI) to Malaysia Genome and Vaccine Institute (MGVI) was a good move, provided the necessary pillars that included financial, talent and ecosystem support were provided for it to achieve its stated aims.

"I hope that this renewed focus will mean that the necessary support will be afforded to these institutes to make vaccine development work.

"MGVI will need to work closely with the Malaysian Institute of Pharmaceuticals and Nutraceuticals which has a large animal research facility so as to optimise resources," he said.



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### SUMMARIES

Ashleytang@thestar.com.my • PETALING JAYA: With three vaccine projects launched through the National Vaccine Development Plan, an expert says Malaysia needs to acquire the necessary technology, talent and funding first before venturing any further. Universiti Malaya epidemiologist Prof Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said the amount allocated for the projects were insufficient, pointing out that the country has never developed a vaccine for human diseases.