

# The Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur

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THIS YEAR THE I.M.R. celebrated its seventieth birthday by opening its doors to the public. Huge crowds, which included the King and Prime Minister, invaded the premises for the first time and were given the opportunity of learning of the work of the Institute. Judging by the interest shown, it would appear there was need for a Public Relations Officer on the staff of the Institute. This seems to be a suitable occasion for the medical profession of Malaysia to look back on the origin and establishment of the Institute, its achievements in the past and its promises for the future.

The large-scale opening up of the country for agriculture, mining and trade with imported labour having little or no immunity to local infections towards the end of the last century brought in its train much morbidity and mortality. The need to study tropical diseases on the spot became apparent. Sir Frank Swettenham, the then President-General of the Federated Malay States, was a man of vision and saw this need and fostered the means for medical research in Malaya. He said: "These States have prospered exceedingly and I cannot imagine any better use to which some of our means may be devoted than a scientific and sustained research into the causes and, if possible, the means of preventing and curing such scourges as beri-beri and all forms of malarial fever . . . ."

The time was opportune for the establishment of a research institute and the first Director, Dr. Hamilton Wright, arrived in 1900 and the institute was formally opened in February 1901. Since its foundation, there has been a steady output of pioneering work by the staff on beri-beri, malnutrition, malaria, typhus, filariasis, dysenteries, leptospirosis, melioidosis, helminthiasis, virus infections and blood diseases, to mention only a few of the main lines of enquiry.

The Institute has undertaken the production of vaccines against small-pox, typhoid, cholera and rabies. There have been many calls on the vaccine production department during local outbreaks and for prevention of diseases. The sale of vaccines is at the same time a source of revenue to Government and the unit has now moved into more spacious accommodation in Petaling Jaya.

Another important function of the I.M.R. is the laboratory diagnostic service provided for the hospitals, clinics and health centres. The ever-growing demand of clinicians and health workers on the laboratory divisions has been a source of strain on the staff who have perforce to neglect their research, the primary objective in founding the institute. It is necessary for the clinical laboratories of the General and District Hospitals to undertake more and more of the routine diagnostic work and turn to the I.M.R.

only for the more complicated techniques and as a reference laboratory for the country as a whole.

This requires adequate numbers of laboratory staff of all categories — professional (medical and non-medical scientists) and technical, and the I.M.R. has undertaken the additional task of training laboratory staff for itself and the hospital and health centre laboratories throughout the country. Young doctors are prepared for higher qualifications in pathology, biochemistry, bacteriology, haematology, etc. before being sent abroad. Courses of studies are organised at the I.M.R. for training students as medical laboratory technologists.

The I.M.R. is now recognised as the national centre for the Central Coordinating Board for Tropical Medicine, one of the offshoots of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation. As such, it undertakes 6-month courses for doctors, veterinarians and scientists of the Southeast Asia region, leading to the postgraduate Diploma in Applied Parasitology and Entomology. I.M.R. is, no doubt, qualified to undertake post-graduate training and, in fact, at one stage attempts were made to incorporate the institute into the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Malaya for this purpose.

Teaching at post-graduate level, however, would have been an almost impossible task but for the assistance given by the staff of the Hooper Foundation and the U.S. Army Medical Research Unit. Since the war, close liaison has been established with

USAMRU, the US Public Health Service and the Hooper Foundation (University of California Medical Research and Training programme) who have brought their staff of researchers, equipment and finances to work in the premises and, in collaboration with the I.M.R. staff, on the health and medical problems of this country. The value of this arrangement was particularly obvious when with Merdeka, rapid Malayisation was encouraged by giving attractive terms of compensation to the expatriates to leave the public service. This particularly affected the I.M.R. adversely as it was found that there were hardly any local researchers on the senior cadre and it was the availability of visiting scientists that helped the I.M.R. tide over the doldrums it had got into at one stage.

It is now rumoured that a Medical Faculty of the Universiti Kebangsaan may be established in association with the General Hospital and the I.M.R. If that is so, it is inevitable that some of the I.M.R. staff will be required to help in the teaching, especially in the para- and pre-clinical subjects. While all this is good and helpful for the quick development of the medical services of the country, there is a real danger that the primary objective of the foundation of the institute, namely research, will be receiving less and less attention as the urgency for the training of medical technologists, scientists, health workers and vaccine production and the need for the expansion of the diagnostic services for the medical department looms large.