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Title : Health experts call for more funding towards emerging pandemics

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SINGAPORE : International health experts want funds to be channelled towards pandemic diseases such as SARs and H1N1.

They raised this on Monday at a forum at NUS on improving health in Asia.

In a closed-door dialogue session with the Minister of Health, Khaw Boon Wan, participants shared with him the challenges of chronic diseases, the ageing population, and the way technology can be used to make healthcare more cost-effective.

Pandemics such as H1NI and SARS have shown just how vulnerable Asia is in dealing with infectious diseases transmitted from animals to humans.

Health experts said the traditional way authorities combat these diseases is also problematic.

Professor David Heymann, chairman of the Health Protection Agency in UK said: "We are identifying disease first in humans, and then we go back and find the animal in which it's occurring.

"What we would like to see is the infection first identified in animals and prevented from coming to humans, or even moving back further to understanding how animals are getting infected and then making sure that they don't get infected."

Professor Heymann said funding a collaborative approach with veterinary sectors is one way outbreaks can be prevented.

Other health professionals also wanted the focus to be on non-communicable diseases such as diabetes.

In Singapore, the rate of diabetes has risen to a 12-year high, according to the latest national health survey.

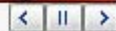
11.3 percent of adults aged between 18 and 69 are diabetic, compared to 8.2 percent in 2004 and 9 per cent in 1998. The survey is done every six years.

"We want to see a large amount of money put into the prevention of these diseases because they have a huge impact on economies of countries. In fact it could bankrupt the economies of a number of Asian countries unless the non-communicable diseases are prevented. Funding so far mainly goes



Photos

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NUS Initiative to Improve Health in Asia forum

towards infectious diseases in the rest of Asia," said Professor Paul Zimmet, Director of Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, Melbourne, Australia.

These concerns will form part of an initiative by NUS to develop research to combat health issues in Asia.

The NUS Initiative to Improve Health in Asia (NIHA) is an integrative initiative set up to improve public health and healthcare delivery in Asia. This was made possible with a funding of S\$17 million over 10 years from the GSK-EDB Trust Fund.

NIHA focuses on research, high-level policy forums and leadership programmes.

Leaders said strategic intervention will require working with governments and policy-makers.

- CNA /ls