



A CNRC researcher attending to a study participant who is using the BodyPod, which measures body fat levels. The CNRC, touted as Asia's first "under-one-roof nutritional research centre", was officially opened at the NUS on Jan 28 last year. PHOTO: LOO HUEI HONG FOR LIANHE ZAOBAO

Can Singapore lead in global health?

In the health sector, each country must complement local responses with global collaboration. Fortunately, Singapore has been a responsible global citizen on this front. BY KISHORE MAHBUBANI and YEOH KHAY GUAN

E **Singapore** *PLURIBUS unum* (Out of many, one) is a phrase on the seal of the United States. It aptly summarises the potential benefits that can be reaped when communities and nations unite in the fight against common global threats. Ability to effectively counter these threats lies in international cooperation and strong national and multinational institutions.

Ebola has just reminded us that we live in a small ever-shrinking global village. Even if we keep our homes clean and spotless, new viruses and bacteria can literally fly in at a moment's notice, sometimes from other parts of the world. That is why it is so important that we combine both local and global efforts in the field of health. This is also the reason the inaugural Raffles Dialogue will take place in Singapore in February. A stellar cast of international speakers, including Pascal Lamy, Mari Pangetsu, and the editor of *The Lancet*, Richard Horton, will be coming to address the broad theme of the *Future of Human Well-being and Security*. Similarly, the Ministry of Health will also be organising a Ministerial Health Summit in mid-February, demonstrating that Singapore has become one of the key centres for global coordination on global health challenges. One little known fact to many Singaporeans is that the World Health Organization (WHO) has established 10 collaborating centres in Singapore alone, covering key areas like health promotion and disease prevention, water and food safety, and bioethics. In short, the Little Red Dot has become a global hotspot in the field of health.

It all began in 1905 when the unstinting fundraising efforts of the visionary Tan Jiak Kim and like-minded community and business leaders of the day led to the establishment of our country's medical school, which has produced generations of medical doctors who have gone on to staff the country's hospitals and clinics. Over time, the school became a university, which is today's NUS. And thanks to the philanthropic support of the Yong Loo Lin Trust and other committed donors, the country's first medical

school continues to flourish today and, with the University, marks its 110th year in July.

The growth and development of this medical capability enabled Singapore to respond positively to the 2004 call of the Mexico Ministerial Summit on Health Research for greater investment in health research and international research collaboration in order to improve national healthcare systems.

The range of medical research in Singapore is truly remarkable. We have invested in research in diseases important in our local population, from myopia to heart failure, cancer and dementia, to deliver better health outcomes for Singaporeans. The NUS Saw Swee Hock School for Public Health aims to improve lives through the provision of scientific evidence and ideas for timely intervention to prevent diseases through health and disease surveillance and the promotion of healthy behaviours. It also works closely with the Ministry of Health to gather and study population-based data to facilitate nation-wide and community-based health policy decisions. Similarly, the Clinical Nutrition Research Centre (CNRC) which is a joint venture between A*Star and NUHS aims to understand the causes of metabolic diseases such as diabetes and obesity, and develop products and formulate diets that can reduce the risks of these diseases.

Singapore's track record in healthcare and medical research was one key reason why the World Health Summit decided to hold a meeting in Singapore in 2013. At this meeting, the M8 Alliance (a group of leading universities including NUS) identified several issues that need to be addressed to ensure sustained health and development. These included promoting and protecting health, ensuring healthcare that is sustainable and accessible to all citizens, reducing non-communicable diseases such as cancer and metabolic diseases, maintaining good maternal and early childhood health and continued surveillance for emerging infectious diseases and antimicrobial resistance. By most global standards, Singapore is doing well in the battle on many of these fronts. We have the second lowest infant mortality rate in the world and one of the highest life expectancies at birth. The merits of our healthcare system are internationally recognised: a 2000

WHO ranking of 191 member states' health systems placed Singapore's at 6th in the world for efficiency. In 2014, Bloomberg rated Singapore's healthcare system as the most efficient out of 51 countries.

However, in the field of health, each country must complement local responses with global collaboration. Fortunately, Singapore has been a responsible global citizen on this front. It plays a modest yet meaningful role in the fight against the threat of global diseases and epidemics. For example, in specific areas such as bio-surveillance and control of infectious diseases, Singapore is an active collaborator and participant. The recent emergence of the H7N9 influenza virus and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (Mers) coronavirus underscores infectious disease as a serious global threat. But despite improved technologies and knowledge, dangerous gaps remain in the bio-surveillance, prevention of and response to infectious agents. Improving early detection, promoting preventive measures such as vaccination, and strengthening response networks are crucial to protect against the spread of infectious disease. Besides technology, capacity, and resources, which already exist, focused leadership and political will are required to make measurable progress. Ebola showed how crucial this is.

Given these multiple and inter-related global health challenges, it is timely that two major health conferences will be held in Singapore in February. Our colleague Tikki Pang of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy has called for a robust, "whole of planet and a whole of society approach involving the media, academia, policy makers, industry, and civic society working together at global and national levels to achieve a common vision of sustainable human existence". We all have a role to play in ensuring human health and well-being in the 21st century.

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The inaugural Raffles Dialogue on the Future of Human Well-being and Security, jointly organised by NUS and the National University Health System, will be held from Feb 2 to Feb 3, 2015