

## Expect more measles outbreaks

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By: David Thien

Kota Kinabalu: As a member state of WHO, Malaysia is committed to achieving measles elimination by 2023. However, in 2023, 1,968 confirmed measles cases were reported, and in the following year, the figure was 3,456, which was a 76 per cent increase. We have passed the deadline with no end to our predicaments.

“The writing on the walls says there will be many more measles outbreaks in Sabah if we do not do more. I should know. In May 2024, I coordinated NGO-led measles-rubella vaccination campaign in Sandakan targeted at the hard-to-reach population. Making vaccination free does not remove barriers to access.

“Vaccine hesitancy is rampant, especially with stories on the side effects of Covid-19 vaccines.

“During the campaign, we took time to explain to the parents that childhood vaccines are different from other vaccines, such as Covid-19 vaccines. Childhood vaccines are well-researched and have undergone rigorous clinical trials before being marketed.

“Unless barriers to access are addressed amicably and expediently, my answer is in the affirmative. Take a leaf from the lessons on the polio outbreak and address the low immunisation coverage in Sabah,” Dr Christina Rundi, who is the Sabah Medical Association President, told a recent Sabar-Kopitiam Council podcast.

She explained that the writing is on the wall not just about vaccine-preventable diseases. Malaysia takes pride in bringing down the incidence of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy, and food and waterborne diseases such as cholera and dysentery.

“Truth be told, tuberculosis never left the shores of Sabah. None of the others has either. Cholera has raised its ugly head on and off since it was detected in North Borneo on 17 January 1962.”

Dr Christina said the only difference is the fatality rate. In this era, one death due to cholera is considered a public health failure. Diseases experienced by our forefathers are associated with poverty and unhealthy living conditions.

“If we just let them be, the same diseases will exist today and most probably, in the future too, perpetuated by a circle of poverty and apathy,” she said.

Lack of clean water supply predisposes the population to waterborne diseases such as cholera and rotavirus infections. Frequent flooding causes water supply disruption and exposes the affected communities to leptospirosis and melioidosis.

The frequent disruption of electricity contributes to the spoilage and waste of food. These disruptions affect people from all walks of life in rural and urban areas.

"There was once a saying in the MOH: "Malaria is Sabah, Sabah is Malaria", which referred to a time in the past when the number of malaria cases reached hundreds of thousands. The country of North Borneo (now Sabah) was designated as a training ground for malaria control by the WHO.

"Human malaria is now zero. There are only monkey malaria, which is difficult to eliminate due to the presence of animal hosts. However, these zoonotic cases like monkey malaria can be brought down to no longer pose a public health burden.

She said in the 1990s, the State Health Department trained a few thousand volunteers known as SPAKA (Sukarelawan Penjagaan Kesihatan Asas), or public health volunteers, among the affected communities.

They identified suspected malaria cases, took blood slides, and examined them. They contributed to the early diagnosis and prompt treatment of malaria within their communities.

"These examples illustrate that we, Sabahans, can make things happen, bring down cases and control outbreaks. We can chart our path towards better health. We should, as we have done many times in the past.

"I thought about these things these past years, about re-igniting community empowerment and mobilization to take health matters into one's hands in the spirit of 'Kita jaga kita', Dr Christina said.

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**"Sabah Voices to Action - Shaping Sabah's Future Together"** is a citizen-driven, non-partisan initiative running from March to June 2025, dedicated to amplifying Sabahans' voices, fostering meaningful discussions, and shaping policies on education, healthcare, public infrastructure, and good governance.

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**Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive Sabah!**



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KUCHING: Sarawak Premier Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg expressed his appreciation for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's openness and swift support for the State's proposed economic reform and initiatives.

Speaking at the Aidilfitri Madani 2025 celebration held at the Indoor Stadium in Petra Jaya, Abang Johari shared a light yet meaningful moment from his recent engagement with Anwar during a special meeting on Sarawak's development.

"On behalf of my colleagues, I thank you, sir, for the deliberation we had just now.

"When I propose a new approach or economic direction, his (Anwar's) response is

ing economic development based on Sarawak's unique strengths.

"With this new direction and an economic approach grounded in Sarawak's capabilities, we are able to contribute meaningfully to Malaysia's development and further strengthen the nation's economic resilience," he said.

Earlier, Anwar chaired the 2025 Special Sarawak Development Meeting at Wisma

ACROSS THE BORDER