

Tap huge potential for diagnostic technologies: Kenneth Mak

Director of medical services calls for research to set benchmarks for accuracy and efficiency

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The Covid-19 pandemic was a “burning platform” that accelerated new diagnostic technologies at an unprecedented speed – with novel test kits and antigen rapid tests developed in less than a year, noted Singapore’s director of medical services Kenneth Mak yesterday.

The field of diagnostics has come to the forefront with the pandemic, with many using rapid test kits to monitor themselves for infections.

“Still, there remains huge potential in how we can leverage technology to set new benchmarks of excellence in diagnostics for accuracy and efficiency,” Associate Professor Mak said in a pre-recorded speech.

His speech was telecast at the inaugural virtual dialogue on accelerating the diagnostics field and its applications in Asia, spearheaded by the SingHealth Duke-NUS Global Health Institute.

The virtual discussion, which involved close to 300 healthcare leaders and diagnostics specialists in Singapore and the region, was born from a global report which

found that 47 per cent of the world’s population have little or no access to diagnostic services.

Diagnostics refers to techniques and tools to diagnose diseases earlier and, sometimes, faster.

The report published last October by the Lancet Commission also found that 35 per cent to 62 per cent of the global population with illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, human immunodeficiency virus and tuberculosis remain undiagnosed.

The SingHealth Duke-NUS Global Health Institute said in a statement yesterday: “The lack of access to diagnostics results in a delayed detection of treatable diseases, and subsequently, poorer health outcomes and increased healthcare costs.”

The chair of the Lancet Commis-

TESTBED FOR ASIANS

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SINGAPORE’S DIRECTOR OF MEDICAL SERVICES KENNETH MAK, calling on Singapore and the region to embark on more research into diagnostics.

sion on Diagnostics, Dr Kenneth Fleming, said the field of diagnostics, globally, is underfunded because its importance is underappreciated.

In his recorded address, Prof Mak covered Singapore’s diagnostics landscape, which includes access to services and affordability, as well as safety and quality of those services.

Beyond improving diagnostics capabilities through new technologies and innovations, he pointed out that Singapore and the region should embark on more research into diagnostics.

This is because there are currently more global studies in this area for the Western population, he added.

“With Asians having different genetic make-up and demograph-

ics, specific studies and discussions on the application of diagnostics for our region are needful.

“Moreover, Singapore’s heterogeneous and racially diverse population makes us a great test bed for diagnostic research and capability testing,” he added.

The discussion yesterday focused on issues such as expanding the number of healthcare workers in the diagnostics-related departments and upskilling existing workers.

The dialogue was organised in partnership with the Academy of Medicine Singapore and the Lancet Commission.

Dr Zhou Lihan, co-founder of local biotech company Mirxes, said that the future of diagnostics in Singapore will include DNA- and RNA-based diagnostic tests that will enable early detection of diseases and timely treatment.

Mirxes developed the world’s first microRNA blood test to detect gastric cancer early.

Dr Zhou was not involved in the virtual discussion yesterday.

More tests would also be available at the community level, to increase access to diagnoses, he added.

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