UM and Cancer Research Malaysia win RM798,693 grant for phone app to detect oral cancer

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British High Commissioner Vicki Treadell said the UK Medical Research Council grant is 'the latest example of collaboration between the UK and Malaysia in healthcare and technology.' — Picture by Yusof Mat Isa

KUALA LUMPUR, NOV 9 — University of Malaya and Cancer Research Malaysia won a UK Medical Research Council grant of £146,920 (RM798,693) to develop a phone app for early detection of oral cancer.

Oral cancer is among the top 5 most common cancers in Asia and for many who live in rural areas, access to healthcare and treatment is expensive. And often too late.

Cancer Research Malaysia has already developed a phone app which can capture images of the oral cavity, and these can then be interpreted remotely by oral medicine specialists.

However, its reliance on the availability of trained specialists makes it expensive and time consuming.

Cancer Research Malaysia is collaborating with AI (Artificial Intelligence) experts in University of Malaya and Kingston University, UK to develop AI solutions to enable rapid readings of the phone images.

"Although Malaysia is very lucky to have universal health coverage, the coverage of cancer diagnostic services is still limited in rural settings," said Professor Dr Cheong Sok Ching, Head of Head and Neck Cancer Research at Cancer Research Malaysia.

She added that the project "builds on existing partnerships that we have with oral specialists in Malaysia, Nepal and Sri Lanka."

Professor Sarah Barman of Kingston University said the "challenge of developing deep learning algorithms and applying them to a range of images taken on a mobile phone is very exciting."

University of Malaya's Dr Chan Chee Seng said, "Our team can't wait to start this new challenge with experts from Cancer Research Malaysia and Kingston University."

British High Commissioner Vicki Treadell said this is "the latest example of collaboration between the UK and Malaysia in healthcare and technology."

She added that this AI solution will make oral cancer detection more accessible not just for people in the rural areas of Malaysia, but "as mobile phone penetration continues to grow, the technology could be applied more widely to address other global health issues."

As it is, Malaysia has one of the highest penetration of mobile phones, with an average of 1.8 phones per person.

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