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Stem cell still taboo in Malaysia – UMS deputy dean

TBP 20 March 2016 4

KOTA KINABALU: The perspective on stem cell has largely remained taboo in Malaysia, said Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Medicine and Health Sciences Faculty (Academic & Student Affairs) deputy dean Professor Dr Ahmad Faris.

As a result, the lack of stem cell based research and treatment deters accessibility to a possible cure for patients with a wide range of illnesses such as leukemia, blood disorders and even neurological disorders.

According to Ahmad, all quarters should rally efforts relating to stem cell research and therapy for the good of society and community in the nation and, in particular, Sabah, which has the largest number of thalassemia patients and carriers in Malaysia.

In addition, he said serious reconsideration of stem cell should especially be made in light of the controversial bio hacking of genome mapping and whole genome sequencing.

“We are still at the stage of talking about advocacy and donor. Since the

1990s we have been talking about stem cell as a potential avenue to treatment of various diseases and disorders that included neuropsychiatric disorders,” said Dr Ahmad at the launch of the First Stem Cell Transplant Awareness Forum here yesterday.

“Unfortunately, we lag behind, we move at our pace, we never sit down and build a consensus, never discuss this in a very productive way.

“We have the national guideline on stem cell research and therapy, what was once a promising guideline, supposed to facilitate the good and honest people to do honest work in this field, has now, somehow, become an obstacle that you have to overcome,” he stressed.

Dr Ahmad said the guideline is intended to facilitate meticulous work to render good service in the growing and increasing demand for stem cell treatment among the public.

“Instead, what is seen now is that we are still classifying our efforts and giving very stringent procedures for us to go through in order to move forward. Of

course, stem cell is a very controversial mode of treatment, but many fields live in taboo,” he explained.

“As a Muslim, what is the national fatwa in respect of stem cell? The religious edict on this issue has been published in 2005 and it is clear that it is permissible to engage in stem cell,” he added.

Since then, Dr Ahmad pointed out that medical advancements have moved on from embryonic stem cell (stem cells derived from the undifferentiated inner mass cells of a human embryo) to focus on adipose tissue mining for stem cells.

“And we are still in the taboo state, worrying about stem cell, originating from embryogenic, and debating on that and failing to move on. This is where we are, the state of where we are,” said Dr Ahmad.

“What are we going to do, that is the question that we have to ask. We have to ask our researchers, clinicians, scientists, biotech experts. We have to ask our religious scholars, and ultimately the policy makers and those who have the money,” he emphasized.