



Adviser to Siriraj Hospital's Medical School dean, Sanjai Saengvichien, right, welcomes the five winners of this year's Prince Mahidol Award yesterday. The award winners, from left, are: Kenneth Brown, Robert Black, Ananda Prasad, Kevin Marsh and Nicholas White.
THITI WANNAMONTHA

HEALTH

Doctor warns of disease revival

APIRADEE TREERUTKUARKUL

Infectious diseases now controlled by advanced drug research and development may threaten the global population in a few years because of a lack of new antibiotics, warns a Prince Mahidol Award laureate.

Nicholas White, award recipient in the field of medicine, said streptococcus pneumoniae, or pneumococcus, which cause acute respiratory infections and sometimes meningitis, was potentially the biggest killer.

Dr White told a meeting ahead of the awards ceremony at the Chakri Throne Hall today that the bacterial infections had become progressively harder to treat and patients were about to face more drug resistance to such diseases.

"All of us take antibiotics, perhaps even the doctors. But do these antibiotics work? No," he said.

"They are not as good as they were before. We're not able to discover new antibiotics as quickly as we're losing the

old ones. So, I think we will see the old organisms cause problems in the next few years."

Dr White, chairman of Wellcome-Trust South East Asian Tropical Medicine Research Unit, is a world leader in the treatment of malaria, which affects 250 million people and kills more than 10 million a year.

The World Health Organisation has warned frequently in recent years that improper and excessive prescription of medicines could cause resistance to antibiotics.

Bacterial resistance to an antibiotic can develop within three or four years of use, while it takes 10 to 20 years of research and development and a cost of at least 15 billion baht to bring a new one to market.

As a result, manufacturers have been more inclined to concentrate on developing drugs for other diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure, in which antimicrobial resistance is not an issue, Dr White said.

Only two new antibiotics had been developed in the past 10 years, he said.

Kevin Marsh, an award recipient for his outstanding contribution to the understanding of the immune epidemiology of malaria, said public investment, local drug production and basic research should be increased since pharmaceutical companies were commercial and therefore tended to develop medicines with profits in mind.

Robert Black, professor of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, said low and middle-income countries could not afford to ignore obesity and other burdensome health issues caused by economic development and lifestyle changes.

Dr Black is among three Mahidol Award laureates in the field of public health. The others are Ananda Prasad, professor of medicine at Wayne State University, and Kenneth Brown, professor of nutrition at University of California Davis. They pioneered works on the importance of zinc in human health

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and zinc supplementation and drew the attention of scientific and public health communities to the issue, encouraging further study.

Dr Prasad expressed his disappoint-

ment at the WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) for not making the issue a priority even though 20% of the world's population were at risk of zinc deficiency.

Dr Prasad urged international agencies to translate scientific studies on the issue into practical applications in a bid to decrease childhood mortality caused by zinc deficiency.