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Profits - A stumbling block for Ebola research

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Singapore: Global experts have commented that the lack of adequate funding was a major drawback that discouraged research to develop medical interventions for potentially lethal diseases like Ebola. Experts opine that Ebola being a rare disease, it was hard to attract investments to hunt for a vaccine or a cure.

Professor Peter Piot, director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who co-discovered the Ebola virus in 1976, said that until this West African outbreak, Ebola was a very rare disease and not a public health problem.

Mr Sylvain Baize, in charge of the Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers Reference Center, France's Pasteur Institute said, "Highly sophisticated P4 labs were necessary for Ebola research due to its extreme lethality. Lack of many P4 labs and qualified personnel to handle such potent viruses too slowed the research."

Prof Piot added many pharmaceuticals are now engaged in hunting a vaccine and that FDA has fast-tracked the process of drug development, given the deteriorating conditions in West Africa.

Mr Seth Berkley, head of the GAVI Alliance, a public-private partnership designed to bring vaccines to poor countries, said that incentives must be offered to pharma companies to encourage drug discovery for such rare and lethal outbreaks.

He added,"There are many ways to handle this. You can directly finance the vaccine technology transfer, you can provide incentives to companies by funding them directly, you can create an advanced market commitment with supplemental funds to try to make it a good deal for business, you can create a long-term plan for buying the vaccines as an incentive."

Mr Berkley said that such aids will encourage many companies to develop drugs for such potent viruses, which if left unattended, may wipe out the world.