

With diseases like Zika, malaria...

Deyalsingh: Vital to set up health research centre

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HEALTH MINISTER Terrence Deyalsingh says there is a need for the development of a research centre focused on health that would aid the ministry in policy-making.

Deyalsingh made the observation yesterday while lamenting that he met no significant data-collection processes at the ministry upon assuming office in 2015.

He was speaking at the opening of a two-day retreat to discuss the proposed establishment of a Southern Caribbean Centre for Health Systems and Policy Research.

The establishment of the centre was proposed by The University of the West Indies (The UWI) Prof Michael Clarke following a study in February.

Yesterday, The UWI officials, along with officials from Caricom and the Pan American Health Organisation/World Health Organisation, participated in the retreat at the Hilton Trinidad and Conference Centre, St Ann's, which served as a forum to discuss the way forward in setting up the centre.

Speaking at the retreat, Deyalsingh said there are several present and emerging public health threats in the Caribbean where more data and research are needed.

He said it is a challenge to formulate good policy without the necessary data being available.

"With applied research, you get data which you can use, which you can then have policy formulated and resources allocated to

bring relief to our population," he said.

Deyalsingh pointed out mosquito-borne diseases as one area where there was a need for more data and research, given the introduction of new viruses such as the Zika virus.

"We need to have some robust research into how we can mitigate against mosquito-borne diseases. We also have a threat in the Caribbean about the resistance to anti-malarial drugs.

"Malaria is going to become more and more of a problem in this part of the Caribbean as Venezuela loses its capacity due to public turmoil to deal with public health threats. We don't want malaria to get a foothold again as it did yet again," he said.

Deyalsingh said it was research on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that guided the ministry's policies to ban soft drinks in schools and other policies that would reduce the number of patients suffering from diabetes and other NCDs in the future.

He said new research is ongoing in this regard, including a Body Mass Index (BMI) study of thousands of schoolchildren across the country.

The proposed Southern Caribbean Centre for Health Systems and Policy Research would be established at The UWI and focus on three countries—namely Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Suriname.

Funding for the centre has been suggested to come from allocations from all three countries, as well as support from The UWI and other research grants.