Humour in a tale of two tumours

Growth wreaked havoc and landed patient in asylum

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GEORGE TOWN: Doctors once sent a tumour patient to a mental hospital, not knowing that the two tumours in his pancreas were responsible for his erratic behaviour.

“They noticed that the patient acted abnormally especially in the mornings before he had his breakfast. It turned out that his blood sugar was extremely low and his insulin level was way above normal,” said consultant surgeon Datuk Dr Harjit Singh.

Further tests revealed that the patient suffered from two neuroendocrine tumours (NETs) in his pancreas.

“The tumours originated from cells that produce insulin and they were pumping insulin into his bloodstream beyond normal levels.

“Once we removed the tumours, he no longer acted strangely,” said Dr Harjit, adding that the case happened about 10 years ago.

NETs are distinctly different from other forms of cancers and tumours because they start in cells throughout the body that produce hormones. Advances in medical science have helped doctors diagnose NETs and improve treatment.

“Chemotherapy works in aggressively growing NETs but there are many other available specific treatments.

“About 10 years ago, we had trouble differentiating NETs from other types of cancer until the condition had advanced, so the medical world could not understand why conventional cancer treatment work on some patients but not others,” he said.

Dr Harjit was speaking to reporters at the 3rd Asia Pacific Neuroendocrine Tumour Society Annual Conference in G Hotel yesterday.

He is the conference organising chairman and also the society president.

More than 200 medical experts worldwide converged for the two-day conference which ends today.

NETs occur most commonly in the lungs and gastrointestinal tract, but can also originate in other parts of the body such as pancreas, ovary and testes.

Endocrine oncology Prof Kjell Oberg from Uppsala University in Sweden said three global advancements in the field of NETs treatment this year could impact the survival rate for NETs patients worldwide.

“The medical world has discovered new drug treatments for lung and gastrointestinal NETs, new radioactive treatment procedures for gastrointestinal NETs and a new drug for treating carcinoid syndrome.

“When I began studying NETs in 1977, I had patients who died after two years. Now I have patients who lived with the disease for more than 15 years, and they died with the disease, not because of it.”