

# \$25m grant to find best ways to treat liver cancer

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Singapore is dedicating \$25 million to liver cancer research in a new five-year programme led by the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) that aims to find the best treatments for the disease.

The team, comprising researchers from various institutions, will work to uncover biomarkers produced by the body or tumour so that specific therapies can be created to combat the most common type of liver cancer, known as hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC).

The research programme and the \$25 million grant for it were announced in a media briefing yesterday.

The research aims to bring about more effective tailored treatments for liver cancer patients, said Professor Pierce Chow, senior consultant at Singapore General Hospital and NCCS' division of surgery and surgical oncology, who is leading the programme.

Earlier this month, the Ministry of Health's National Medical Research Council awarded the \$25 million grant to the researchers, who are from NCCS, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research's Genome Institute of Singapore and Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology, the Cancer Science Institute of Singapore and Duke-NUS Medical School.

In Singapore, liver cancer is the third most common cause of cancer deaths in men and the fifth most common one in women.

It is difficult to diagnose the disease at early stages because the liver is an internal organ and once symptoms emerge, the cancer has already advanced, said Prof Chow. After removing the tumour in early-stage patients, there are no available therapies to prevent the tumour from returning.

He said: "This inability to prevent the tumour from coming back even when diagnosed early (and with surgery) is the reason why the survival of patients with early liver cancer is not as good as those with early-stage breast, colorectal or lung cancer."

The programme, called Precision Medicine In Liver Cancer

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# 2 clinical studies to be done

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Across An Asia-Pacific Network (PLANet 2.0), will involve two clinical studies.

In the first one, at least 30 liver cancer patients will undergo immunotherapy after surgery to reduce the chance of the tumour returning.

Immunotherapy is a type of biological therapy, mainly given intravenously and orally, that helps the immune system fight cancer better.

The second study will involve 176 intermediate- and advanced-stage liver cancer patients who will receive internal radiation therapy. Half of them will receive a type of immunotherapy while the rest will be placed in a placebo group. This will help researchers determine if patients do better with a combination of the novel radiation therapy and immunotherapy.

The researchers will take scans and collect blood and urine samples before, during and after the clinical studies.

The two clinical studies will take place concurrently at public hospitals and cancer institutions here, as well as 11 hospitals in the Asia-Pacific region. Some patients will start treatment from next month.

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