

New research centre to boost S'pore's fight against dengue, Zika

Duke-NUS, Johnson & Johnson tie-up to focus on diseases caused by flaviviruses

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A new research centre will aid in the fight against mosquito-borne diseases like dengue and Zika by developing drug treatments against them.

Launched yesterday, the J&J Satellite Centre for Global Health Discovery is a partnership between Duke-NUS Medical School and pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson.

It will focus on diseases caused

by flaviviruses, for which no specific treatments currently exist, said Duke-NUS in a statement.

Flaviviruses – which also cause illnesses such as West Nile fever, tick-borne encephalitis and yellow fever – infect around 400 million people each year.

Singapore has reported more than 15,800 cases of dengue this year, according to figures from the National Environment Agency, compared with 5,258 cases logged for the whole of last year.

Associate Professor Christopher Laing, vice-dean for innova-

tion and entrepreneurship at Duke-NUS, said he was confident that the centre would break new ground in curbing the threat of these diseases.

Dr Ruxandra Draghia-Akli, global public health research head at Janssen Research and Development under J&J, said: "Singapore is both a leading innovation and research hub and one of the epicentres of the dengue threat, making Duke-NUS a natural match for our vision to address flaviviruses by advancing innovative science."

Duke-NUS recently worked with SingHealth's Investigational Medicine Unit to conduct a clinical trial on Janssen's antiviral compound for preventing and treating dengue.

Speaking to the media at the launch yesterday, Professor Ooi Eng Eong from the emerging infectious diseases programme at Duke-NUS noted that the drug is currently in phase two clinical trials here.

How fast a drug is developed depends on how well these trials go, he said, though he noted that this goal is still several years away.

"Maybe optimistically three to five years, possibly more," he said.

Professor Subhash Vasudevan, who is co-lead of research at the J&J Satellite Centre at Duke-NUS, said: "Work at the new centre will be to build on J&J's own research into dengue for more than a decade."

One possible goal is the development of a drug effective against a variety of flaviviruses, he said, noting this could happen within the next five years.

At the 5th Asia Dengue Summit held in Singapore last week, researchers suggested that prophylactic drugs could be used effectively to prevent the spread of the dengue virus.

And in a Forum letter to *The Straits Times* last month, Professor Tikki Pang, former director of research policy and cooperation at the World Health Organisation, also called for wider use of the Dengvaxia vaccine among seniors.

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