

\$350m scheme to tackle key health challenges of a super-ageing society

It calls on private companies to help solve cognitive decline, loss of physical function

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Singapore has launched a \$350 million research programme aimed at tackling cognitive decline and loss of physical function, calling on private companies to help solve the two key health challenges of a super-ageing society.

Dubbed the “grand challenge”, the programme aims to develop biomarkers, approaches and interventions that can help reduce the onset or progression of cognitive impairment and decline in physical function.

It will open up the playing field for public-private collaborations to fast-track breakthroughs in preventive care.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said on May 22: “Many relevant capabilities, technologies and talent reside in the private sector. But what private industry and companies do not have is the high-quality and comprehensive data that the Government has. If we can combine the strengths of both the public and private sectors, we can make meaningful and transformative improvements.”

Industry players can partner lo-

cal researchers and institutions to develop strong, concrete use cases and then test, validate and implement their initiatives in Singapore’s real care settings, he said.

Any intellectual property generated by the public-private research collaborations will be co-owned by the public and private sectors.

Mr Ong, who is also Coordinating Minister for Social Policies, was speaking at the National Medical Research Council (NMRC) Awards Ceremony and Research Symposium 2026, which was held at the Parkroyal Collection Marina Bay, Singapore.

The “Maximising Healthy and Successful Longevity” grand challenge, which was launched on May 22, comes under Singapore’s \$37 billion five-year Research, Innovation and Enterprise 2030 plan.

Mr Ong said the Ministry of Health (MOH) will commit \$2.5 billion as part of the plan, focusing also on generating robust, localised evidence on how genomics can be integrated into healthcare delivery, and building artificial intelligence tools and models for the Healthier SG national initiative.

First mentioned in December 2025, the longevity grand challenge will run for five years till



Health Minister Ong Ye Kung delivering the opening address at the National Medical Research Council Awards Ceremony and Research Symposium on May 22. Launched on the same day, the “Maximising Healthy and Successful Longevity” grand challenge will open up the playing field for public-private collaborations to fast-track breakthroughs in preventive care. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

2031. It focuses on brain health and physical function, two areas where Asian populations are differently affected compared with their Western counterparts.

There is a need to better understand the development and progression of vascular dementia, which accounts for nearly half of all dementia cases in Singapore, at roughly twice the proportion seen in Western populations, said Mr Ong. Vascular dementia results in brain damage due to reduced blood flow, often following a stroke.

By addressing the knowledge

gaps, Singapore can develop new tests for vascular dementia or devise novel interventions that may delay its onset, progression or clinical impact, Mr Ong said.

Regarding physical function, the longevity grand challenge will take the same approach for conditions like sarcopenic obesity, which significantly adds to the risk of frailty in older adults, he added.

Sarcopenic obesity, characterised by simultaneous muscle loss and fat accumulation, affects Asians differently, occurring at lower body mass indexes and ear-

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HEALTH MINISTER ONG YE KUNG

lier in life than in Western populations, he said.

The challenge also seeks to understand how sex hormones and the menopausal transition accelerate physical decline in Asian women, and evaluate strategies to maintain physical function.

Beyond medicine, the challenge wants to look into the “socio-envi-

ronmental” factors of ageing. Researchers will study how the built environment, social systems and digital health technologies – including housing design, neighbourhood walkability, community spaces and volunteer networks – can be optimised to keep seniors active and reduce the onset of cognitive impairment.

Mr Ong said selected public-private research collaborations will be able to leverage Trusted Research and Real World-Data Utilisation and Sharing Tech, a national analytics platform that facilitates access to nearly 50 anonymised health and health-related data sets for research use.

Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, is executive director of the grand challenge, which is led by the National Research Foundation in partnership with MOH. The challenge will establish a cohort with at least 10,000 participants from 40 years old, and also include relevant existing cohorts.

At the May 22 event, 138 people received the NMRC Talent Awards.

In addition, Professor Ivy Ng, senior adviser of the SingHealth board, received the NMRC Distinguished Contributor Award.

In his speech, Mr Ong said Prof Ng had made many contributions to the development of clinician-scientists and shaped Singapore’s translational and clinical research landscape. Furthermore, she continues to support the ongoing development of the nation’s precision health research ecosystem.

Singapore has 185 nationally supported clinician-scientists today, some of whom have become world leaders in research fields such as cancer, cardiovascular health, infectious diseases and ophthalmology, Mr Ong said.

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