



Cancer patients may have greater access to latest drugs under trial



Dr Ira Mellman, vice-president of cancer immunology at Genentech, speaking at a panel discussion at SGInnovate on July 24. The Singapore Translational Cancer Consortium is the first South-east Asian member of the immunotherapy Centres Of Research Excellence network, a global alliance of scientific and clinical experts in cancer immunotherapy. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Singapore cancer consortium admitted to global network that lets it take part in trials

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A national cancer consortium here has been admitted into an international expert network that will allow it to participate in global cancer trials.

For Singaporeans, it could mean access to new cancer drugs being tested, while the network will gain access to a diverse pool of Asian

trial participants.

The immunotherapy Centres Of Research Excellence (imCore) network is a global alliance of scientific and clinical experts in cancer immunotherapy, led by Swiss healthcare company Roche and its subsidiary, biotechnology firm Genentech.

On July 24, the Singapore Translational Cancer Consortium (STCC) became its 27th member, joining groups such as Johns Hop-

kins Medicine in the United States, the Asan Medical Centre in South Korea and Germany's University Hospital Essen.

"Singaporean patients will have access to the very latest types of pharmaceuticals that we're developing," said Dr Ira Mellman, vice-president of cancer immunology at Genentech, which is based in the US.

ImCore was launched in 2016, with Roche investing more than \$150 million in cancer immunotherapy research at the time.

Among its contributions is helping to fund the development of a pancreatic cancer vaccine candi-

date that is currently in a Phase II trial.

STCC, a programme of the Consortium for Clinical Research and Innovation, Singapore, led a coalition of five public healthcare and research institutions – the National Cancer Centre Singapore, National University Cancer Institute, Singapore, National University Hospital, National University of Singapore (NUS) and Tan Tock Seng Hospital – into the imCore network.

STCC was set up in 2020 to coordinate Singapore's cancer research capabilities at a national level.

It is the first South-east Asian

member of imCore, as well as the first consortium to join the network.

A memorandum of understanding between STCC and Roche was signed on July 24 at the office of government-owned tech investor SGInnovate in Carpenter Street.

The signing event also included a panel discussion on optimising collaborative efforts in cancer research, moderated by Dr Anand Jeyasekharan, principal investigator with the Cancer Science Institute of Singapore at NUS.

The discussion involved Dr Mellman, STCC executive director

Chng Wee Joo, and Associate Professor Daniel Tan, head of the division of clinical trials and epidemiological sciences at the National Cancer Centre Singapore.

Immunotherapy is a treatment that harnesses the body's own immune system to fight cancer.

Professor Chng said access to new drugs under clinical trial will allow researchers to better identify new biomarkers, which are a measure of the presence or progress of disease, or the effects of treatment.

In the longer term, this could also lead to a reduction in healthcare treatment costs for patients here, as treatments can be more accurately prescribed for suitable patients, Prof Chng told reporters.

Singapore's membership in the international network will also help raise the country's visibility in the fields of science and medicine, he said, noting that Singapore's ethnic diversity – representing some 80 per cent of Asia's ethnic groups – could also help benefit global cancer research.

"Incorporating these diverse Asian genetic backgrounds into the research ensures that our advancements in healthcare are inclusive and generally globally relevant," he said.

He added that over the next few months, STCC will assess fully the mechanisms of funding available through the partnership.

Prof Chng noted that a number of STCC members had in the past sought unsuccessfully to gain entry into imCore, putting the failure down to the individual institutions being relatively small and limited in their scope.

However, as a consortium, STCC presented a "completely different proposition" to imCore, having greater resources to contribute to the network, he said.

Dr Mellman said that because research on cancer treatments is so new, it feels like "building the plane while we're flying it".

He added that the partnership between imCore and STCC will help advance cancer research here by providing Singapore researchers with access to new drugs – such as those still under clinical trial – that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

"If someone in Singapore has a distinct interest in a particular scientific area that is relevant to any of these drugs, we will make that agent available for study," he said.

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