

S'pore partners Israel in scientific research

SINGAPORE and Israel have joined forces in scientific research.

The National Research Foundation (NRF) announced yesterday that it has tied up with two top Israeli universities - the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology (Technion) and the Weizmann Institute of Science - to combat heart disease; and study how tissues and organs are formed.

Explaining the decision to partner Israel in the \$40 million collaboration, NRF's chief executive Francis Yeoh said that it stemmed from Singapore's long friendship with the nation over many years, especially in defence work.

"We are all aware of their technological advances in research, and their technopreneurial spirit," he said.

The heart disease project will see Technion, Nanyang Technological University and the National

University of Singapore (NUS) working together.

A senior lecturer from Technion's biomedical engineering faculty, Dr Dror Seliktar, said that the scientists hope to use stem cells to create tissue to repair heart muscle damaged after a heart attack.

Cardiovascular disease is the No.1 killer in countries such as the United States. Last year, some US\$156 billion (S\$234 billion) was spent treating cardiovascular-related disease, he said.

"We hope to have something ready for the clinic in five years," he added.

In Singapore, heart disease and stroke - both components of cardiovascular disease - are together the No. 1 killer here.

In the second project, the Weizmann Institute is partnering Singapore's Temasek Life Sciences Labo-

ratory and NUS, to study how cells and tissues gain and generate their shape.

Explained Professor Benjamin Geiger of the institute's molecular cell biology department: "The shape they are developing is essential for the function of the cells.

"If they don't function properly, it can lead to malfunction and disease."

The process where a cell develops its shape and structure occurs in a large number of organisms, said Prof Geiger, and the team plans to start by studying the simple cells of yeast.

It also plans to look at how cells receive signals from their environment, and how this affects their form, he added.

Prof Geiger applauded Singapore's continued investment in R&D at a time of economic gloom.

"Israel is a small country and we share many similarities with Singapore.

"For countries of this size and limited amount of natural resources, the only good investment is in science and technology. Limiting this investment is very dangerous for the future," he said.

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