

New centre offers more targeted way to treat cancer

By LINETTE LAI

DOCTORS can get a clearer picture of a cancer patient's genes and tailor better treatment if they put cancer cells under the microscope.

The problem, though, is that it is hard to extract these cells, which are often found in tumours deep in the body.

But a research centre launched yesterday at the National Cancer Centre Singapore promises to make it easier for doctors to tap such cells and devise more effective cures.

Called the Circulating Tumour Cell Centre of Research Excellence, it is a joint project by the cancer centre and local company Clearbridge BioMedics, which has developed a method to obtain cancer cells more easily.

"This is the age of personalised medicine, and it's important to be able to tailor the treatment that we give to patients based on the profile of the tumours that they have," said Professor Soo Khee Chee, director of the cancer centre.

With the new method, which will be used at the research centre, cancer cells can be harvested from a regular blood sample without the need for complicated procedures to get cells from tumours.

The blood sample contains cancer cells that have detached themselves from the main tumour to circulate in the bloodstream, known by doctors as "circulating tumour cells".

Only a few such cells are present out of billions of blood cells in each millilitre of blood.

The sample is fed into a machine, which picks out these precious cells.

Once extracted, the cells can then be studied to quickly assess how the patient is responding to treatment. This can be done, for example, by comparing cells taken before, during and after treatment, said Prof Soo.

Cancer is the deadliest illness in Singapore, accounting for about 30 per cent of deaths in 2011.

The centre holds out the promise of improved treatments, said Prof Soo. "If it works out, it will be a big step forward in terms of management of our cancer patients."

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