

New organ transplant centre to offer better care, shorter wait

SingHealth Duke-NUS research, education hub to explore ways to boost access to organs

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SingHealth and Duke-NUS Medical School have launched a new disease centre for transplant expertise, including research and education, in an effort to improve transplant care and increase access to organs.

The SingHealth Duke-NUS Transplant Centre will consolidate solid organ, tissue and cellular transplantation services under one roof.

These include kidney, liver and heart transplants, as well as corneal tissue, ovarian tissue and umbilical cord blood transplants.

Speaking at the launch at Singapore General Hospital yesterday, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said: "This new transplant centre aims to harmonise SingHealth's clinical expertise for transplant with its research and education capabilities.

"It will explore ways to improve transplant survival rates, optimise

the quality of patients' lives and keep transplant-related costs affordable for patients."

Leading the centre is Associate Professor Prema Raj Jeyaraj, a senior consultant at the Singapore General Hospital's department of hepato-pancreato-biliary and transplant surgery.

He said the centre will see health-care professionals from different disciplines – such as dietitians, physiotherapists, nurses and doctors – working together to improve transplant care, increase access to organs and reduce waiting time.

The National Kidney Foundation website says the average waiting

time for a kidney transplant in Singapore is nine years. More than 250 patients are on the waiting list.

Prof Prema Raj said one way to increase the supply of organs for transplant is to obtain them from donors after circulatory death, when the heart has stopped pumping.

Solid organs like the kidney, heart and liver are now taken from donors only after brain death, he said.

Most vital organs quickly become non-viable for transplantation shortly after oxygen supply is cut.

But if doctors can retrieve the organs within about 55 minutes of circulatory death, they can still be used for transplants, said Prof Prema Raj.

"There is currently a trial being done at Tan Tock Seng Hospital using kidneys from donors after circulatory death. We want to extend that to other organs. I think that will reduce our need for living donors."

On the research front, the centre will look at developing treatment strategies to reduce the need for lifelong immunosuppressants by improving the body's tolerance for transplanted organs.

It will also explore the possibility of developing technology to 3D bio-print organs.

The centre will work with the National Organ Transplant Unit and other institutions, such as the Na-

tional University Centre for Organ Transplantation, to educate health-care professionals and the public about organ transplants, Prof Prema Raj said.

The launch was held on the first day of the hospital's 23rd annual scientific meeting, which ends today.

In the first of four plenary lectures, Professor Brian Kennedy, director of the National University Health System Centre for Healthy Ageing, spoke about preventing diseases by targeting the ageing process.

Research on mice has shown that some existing drugs like metformin, used to treat Type 2 diabetes, and rapamycin, an immunosuppressant used to prevent organ transplant rejection, may also have anti-ageing properties, Prof Kennedy said.

He called ageing the "climate change of healthcare" and said it is the largest risk factor for chronic illnesses like cardiovascular diseases.

A shift in mindset towards preventive medicine is needed to counter Singapore's growing healthcare burden as the population ages, he said.

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