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New consortium to help researchers turn health technology discoveries into products

(From left) Director of HealthTEC and iHealthtech, Professor Lim Chwee Teck; NUS deputy president of research and technology, Professor Chen Tsuhan; executive director of the Ministry of Health's Office for Healthcare Transformation and chief health scientist, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan; executive director of the research, innovation and enterprise coordination office at the National Research Foundation, Mr Lim Tuang Liang; and director of services and digital economy at the NRF, Mr George Loh. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

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SINGAPORE - From the time an academic paper is published about a medical discovery, it can take 10 years or longer for it to be translated into a commercially available product.

This is partly because many researchers move on to the next project after publishing research papers, or they remain stuck at the prototype stage.

To accelerate the process of turning a medical discovery, for example, into a novel piece of health technology, the National Research Foundation on Monday (July 1) launched the new national Health Technologies Consortium (HealthTEC).

The consortium will matchmake industry partners with academics at research institutes and institutions of higher learning.

It will be housed at the Institute of Health Innovation & Technology (iHealthtech) at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Professor Lim Chwee Teck, who is the director of iHealthtech, said some researchers see research papers and not commercial products as their "deliverables".

But society can benefit from the experts working on the discovery.

"Our ultimate aim is to capture value through faster translation of research outputs into benefits for patients and society as well," said Prof Lim, who is also the director of the consortium.

He added that the consortium will focus its efforts on health-sensing technologies such as tactile sensors and molecular diagnostics, as well as health analytics and artificial intelligence.

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Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, chief health scientist at the Ministry of Health and executive director of the ministry's Office for Healthcare Transformation, was the guest of honour at the launch. The event was attended by clinicians, scientists and industry professionals.

He said: "By bringing together researchers across many disciplines and institutions, HealthTEC can actively contribute to the creation of a vibrant and exciting community of researchers and innovators who each bring... particular skills towards developing novel solutions to critical challenges."

The consortium will facilitate interactions between members at networking sessions, workshops, discussions and symposiums.

Companies that join the consortium as members will be able to access the latest research in fields such as bioelectronics, biomimetic materials (materials that mimic the properties of natural materials like spider silk and shark skin), robotics and smart sensors.

Members can also receive seed funding from the consortium to help kick-start collaboration projects.

Four companies have already joined as founding industry members - they are Singapore Technologies (ST) Engineering, Ferrero Asia Pacific, Tip Biosystems and Roceso Technologies.

Dr Yap Hong Kai, chief technology officer at Roceso, said the consortium would make the process of taking a discovery into the market easier for aspiring entrepreneurs, including graduate students and researchers.

While he was pursuing his PhD in biomedical engineering at NUS, Dr Yap was part of a team that invented a soft robotic glove to help stroke patients regain their grip strength during physical rehabilitation.

But he had no business experience and did not know how to turn the team's research into a marketable product.

Later, while attending a course on entrepreneurship, he met Ms Jane Wang, who had studied a mix of robotics, business and entrepreneurship, and intellectual property law at NUS and the Nanyang Technological University.

Together with Dr Yap's mentor, Associate Professor Raye Yeow from the department of biomedical engineering at the NUS Faculty of Engineering, the trio decided to co-found Roceso. Ms Wang is the company's chief executive.

The invention, called EsoGlove, has already been sold to a hospital in the United States and Roceso is now working with the National University Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital to run clinical trials here, Dr Yap said.