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Healthcare research gets a boost with launch of consortium

It brings together various national-level R&D initiatives and clinical services

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(From left) MOH Holdings managing director Anthony Tan, MOH Holdings chairman Chan Yeng Kit, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, Cris chairman John Lim and Cris chief executive Danny Soon at the launch of the consortium at The Star Performing Arts Centre yesterday. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the Singapore Clinical Research Institute (Scri) supported the National Centre for Infectious Diseases in clinical trials of Covid-19 medications like Eli Lilly's antibody cocktail and small molecule antivirals like Remdesivir.

By conducting these trials locally, severely ill patients had early access to the medicines. The data generated from these trials also contributed towards the prompt global registration of these life-saving drugs.

Scri, which was set up in 2008, will now be part of a new national consortium, the Consortium for Clinical Research and Innovation, Singapore (Cris).

Set up in 2020, Cris was officially launched yesterday to bring together the research programmes of the Ministry of Health (MOH).

Cris is funded by the National Research Foundation and MOH, and consolidates various national-level research and development initiatives and clinical services, establishing them as business units and facilitating synergistic collaboration between them.

These five units are Scri; National Health Innovation Centre, Singapore (NHIC); Advanced Cell Therapy and Research Institute, Singapore (Actris); Precision Health Research, Singapore (Precise); and Singapore Translational Cancer Consortium (STCC).

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung was the guest of honour at the launch at The Star Performing Arts Centre yesterday.

Cris gives some of the smaller units more scale, its chief executive Danny Soon said. For instance, it helps to centralise some corporate services of these business units, such as in areas of cyber security, human resources, finance, legal and corporate communication.

NHIC, established in 2014, serves to translate innovation into commercial enterprises and products.

One example of a medtech product it supported is Singapore eye lesion analyser Selena+.

The existing model of screening for diabetic retinopathy is resource intensive and time consuming, requiring manual examination of patients' retinal images.

Selena+ uses artificial intelligence to analyse images for signs of eye diseases within minutes. It has been deployed nationwide to more than 20 private optometric practices and has improved retinal screening and reduced the complications of diabetes.

Precise, set up in 2021, facilitates the use of technology to customise healthcare. It is currently working with partners to build up lifestyle, environmental and clinical data to gain insights into the factors that contribute to diseases and conditions prevalent in Asia.

STCC was established in 2020 as an integrated platform to coordinate cancer research and translation at the national level – for example, looking for markers that can identify patients at risk of developing certain cancers.

Actris, set up in 2020, looks into the area of cell therapy. In recent years, cell therapies have come to the fore as highly effective treatments for several cancers, but are very costly to develop and manufacture, requiring advanced technologies and specialised staff with skills that are difficult to come by, Mr Ong said.

The official launch saw the signing of two memorandums of understanding.

First, Actris and the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine jointly launched a professional certification course on the principles and practice of cell therapy.

This will build up the niche expertise and know-how to make and administer cell therapy products, Mr Ong noted. This course is the first of its kind in Asia.

Second, Scri will partner local health-tech company Oncoshot to leverage the latter's technology which has the potential to significantly enhance the initiation, screening and enrolment of patients in oncology trials at public healthcare institutions.

"With over two decades of investment in the biomedical sciences, we are now seeing greater innovation and translation and significant growth of our healthcare research ecosystem. Cris and its business units play a critical role in this," Mr Ong said.

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