

## **\$12m gift for leukaemia research**

Straits Times (Thursday, 5 March 2009)

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By Lee Hui Chieh

New therapy using parents' immune cells to be tested on 20 children.

A TRIAL to treat children who have leukaemia with immune cells taken from their parents will soon begin.

These 'natural killer cells' will be purified before they are transplanted into the sick child to help fight the cancer cells alongside chemotherapy drugs.

If it works, it could boost the treatment of the blood cancer, which afflicts 50 to 60 children here every year.

And it is being made possible because of a \$12 million donation from the Goh Foundation to fund research and set up a professorship in paediatric oncology at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

The sum will be matched dollar-for-dollar by the Government, bringing the total to \$24 million.

If the new therapy works well, the amount of chemotherapy can be cut, and children be exposed to fewer side effects, said Associate Professor Allen Yeoh, senior consultant at the University Children's Medical Institute.

The trial will be carried out on about 20 children over five years at the institute, which is part of the National University Hospital (NUH). It is part of a larger one on 300 children being carried out by St Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, in the United States, which pioneered the treatment.

With St Jude's help, Singapore might be able to raise its childhood leukaemia cure rate from 80 per cent to St Jude's 90 per cent, Prof Yeoh said.

Every year, about 120 to 140 children in Singapore are diagnosed with cancer, of whom about four in 10 have leukaemia.

The Goh Foundation, which was started by tycoon Goh Cheng Liang of Wuthelam Holdings, declined to comment.

Its donation had been solicited by the Viva Foundation for Children with Cancer, a charity which aims to raise childhood cancer survival rates in the region by supporting research and the training of professionals in the field.

It has raised \$24 million, including the latest donation, since it was set up in 2006 by a group of philanthropists such as Foreign Minister George Yeo's wife, Mrs Jennifer Yeo.

Mrs Yeo said yesterday: 'The Goh Foundation is sympathetic to our cause. Nothing is more significant than being able to save the lives of children.'

Part of the money raised earlier has gone into the \$5 million Viva-University Children's Cancer Care Centre at NUH, which has been in operation for a year. It was officially opened yesterday by Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan.

The centre gathers beds, bone marrow transplant rooms, and chemotherapy and day care facilities, previously situated in different parts of NUH, under one roof.

The number of beds and transplant rooms has also been increased so children do not have to wait for these to be available to start treatment, Prof Yeoh said.

This was the experience of Ms Kheak Tong Hak, who took her seven-year-old son to the centre last October after bruises appeared all over his limbs. He was diagnosed with leukaemia and his treatment started the same day.

The 43-year-old housewife said: 'I felt assured that treatment began quickly because cancer cells multiply very fast.'