

# New fund aims to draw young scientists

The National Research Foundation's new grant puts a lot of money in the hands of young scientists. **Judith Tan** and **Lee Hui Chieh** speak to researchers about its pull factor, what can result in casting such a wide net, and other grants available out there

**CLINICIAN-SCIENTIST** Allen Yeoh's study in projected cure in childhood leukaemia is going well – and a cure rate of 80 per cent is possible.

What he needs now to complement his study is "the technology that can apply the treatment to cure these kids", Associate Professor Yeoh, a senior consultant with the Children's Medical Institute at the National University Hospital, told The Straits Times.

He is banking on the National Research Foundation's (NRF) research fellowship grant of up to US\$1.5 million (S\$2.3 million) over three years to lure young scientists already looking into this technology to "parachute in and conduct their study here".

The new NRF research package is open to all nationalities and all areas of science and technology with no quota on specific disciplines.

It comes not just with some of the most generous funding around, but it prom-

ises high salaries and permanent positions as well.

These perks are aimed at the "babies" of the research world – young post-doctoral scientists aged 35 and under.

A spokesman for NRF said the scheme will generate good ideas from bottom up. "Working in a local research institution will give the research fellow and his team ample opportunities to interact and collaborate with local researchers and students," she said.

The generous budget is necessary to help young researchers link up with overseas institutions to help with the research, said Dr Eugene Soh, the National Healthcare Group's deputy chief projects officer overseeing research and development.

He said: "Research is getting more collaborative. You have to partner others if you want your work to make it internationally."

The size of the grant alone is a big pull factor for young scientists to apply for

it, and even relocate to Singapore if they are now based overseas, researchers say.

This is especially since the world's research powerhouse, the United States, is limiting finances in research. The budget for its largest source of funding for biomedical research, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has stagnated at US\$28 billion or so since 2004.

It is estimated that if this year's NIH budget remains at last year's US\$28.6 billion, the agency will lose more than 9 per cent of its purchasing power compared to four years ago, due to inflation.

The new NRF grant works out to about \$760,000 a year, more than the \$200,000 to \$500,000 a year typically given to young scientists here.

In the US, young scientists get probably just half of what the new grant awards, estimated Professor Barry Halliwell, the National University of Singapore's deputy president (research and technology).

He said: "In the US, new investigators have been finding it more difficult to obtain funds. This grant might be attractive to them."

Professor Edison Liu, head of the Genome Institute of Singapore, told The Straits Times that such awards are similar to the prestigious Howard Hughes or Ludwig Foundation awards.

Noting that US\$500,000 a year for a junior researcher was a bit on the high side, he said: "I'd prefer this amount to be stretched over four to five years for junior individuals."

He cautioned that the NRF needs to pay attention to what happens to these individuals when they are done with the research and are still working at the universities.

Also urging caution is Dr Ting Choon Meng, the chairman and CEO of home-grown medical technology company, HealthSTATS International. He said the grant is a good start as it is a big net which the Government is casting.

"But we must have the means to sieve through the pile and not throw away the pearl for the fish eye. It is a tedious process and we cannot assume we have all the expertise. There must be strong industrial input to balance off the academic spectacles. I hope the competition will be very tough," he said.

Agreeing, Mr Steven Fang, Group CEO of CyGenics and past chairman of Bio-Singapore, said what might be more useful is a separate budget "to follow on with the successful candidates or fellowship into the next realm of translational research and perhaps even commercialisation".

**Grant an important step in retaining research talent, Page S11**

## Where the research money comes from

### » Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*Star)

- (a) Clinician-Scientist Investigator Award:
  - Jointly awarded by A\*Star's Biomedical Research Council (BMRC) and Ministry of Health's National Medical Research Council.
  - Given every year since 2004 to clinician-scientists who are Singapore citizens or permanent residents.
  - Recipient must commit at least 60 per cent of their time on research, which must be conducted in Singapore.
  - The award, over three to five years, funds part of each doctor's salary to make up for time lost in seeing patients. It also provides up to \$200,000 for junior clinician-scientists to fund their research projects.

- (b) Singapore Bioimaging Consortium's second grant call on "Image Processing, Analysis and Storage in Relation to Human Disease":
  - Jointly awarded by BMRC and A\*Star's Science and Engineering Research Council.
  - Research must be done in Singapore, and by collaboration between institutions.
  - Provides an average grant of \$500,000 over three years, up to \$1 million per grant.

### » Ministry of Health's National Medical Research Council

Awards individual or collaborative grants twice a year. Grants believed to be about \$200,000 a year.

### » National Healthcare Group (NHG)

For researchers employed by NHG. No restrictions on age or research area.

- (a) Small Innovative Grant (SIG):

– Started in 2005 to help doctors obtain initial results to give them a better chance of getting a national grant.

– Provides \$50,000 a year for two years.

- (b) Small Innovative Grant Phase II (SIG II):
  - Starting next month, doctors with successful SIG projects can apply for this grant to expand their studies.
  - Provides up to \$200,000 a year, for three years.

### » National University of Singapore

– Newly hired faculty members get start-up funds for research.

– Each faculty gets a sum, which it uses to fund the best proposals from its researchers. This typically provides for under \$180,000 per project.

– Hands out Young Investigator Award every year, to the best new researchers. This provides about \$500,000 over two to three years.

– The Ministry of Education provides funds for some research projects expected to need more than \$500,000.

### » SingHealth Foundation

– For researchers of any age employed by SingHealth, looking preferably into three areas: oncology, ophthalmic and vision sciences and the neurosciences.

– Gave out \$8.1 million in total grants last year. A grant for a start-up project can be up to \$50,000, while that for a regular project can be up to \$200,000.