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Government committed to investing in biomedical R&D: DPM Teo

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DPM Teo Chee Hean with 88-year-old Nobel laureate Sydney Brenner, whom he said "spurred us to start the Institute of Molecular & Cell Biology 30 years ago".

CAPTION

SINGAPORE: Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean has said that the Government remains committed to investing in research and development (R&D) efforts to consolidate Singapore's position as a regional biomedical hub.

He was speaking at the 30th anniversary of A*STAR's Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology (IMCB) on Friday (May 8).

MerLion Pharmaceuticals is an example of a successful spin-off from A*STAR's IMCB. Founded in 2002, it recently received approval from the US Food and Drug Administration for a new anti-bacterial drug finafloxacin, that can be used to treat various infections. With the drug on the verge of commercialisation, MerLion said its collaboration with pharmaceutical companies was critical in bringing its drug development forward.

"R&D, certainly in the biomedical field, is often usually international and across borders and works very well in Singapore particularly. So we have had some great collaborations," said MerLion Pharmaceuticals' CEO, Mr David Dally. "And the one that has been the success that has got us to the finishing line is our collaboration with Alcon. We have partnered our drug with them in 2010 and by 2014, the drug got through to approval with FDA."

IMCB has been a key player in Singapore's biomedical research efforts. It had an important role in fighting dengue, SARS and H1N1 influenza and it intends to continue working with institutions and hospitals.

Said the executive director of A*STAR's IMCB, Professor Hong Wanjin: "(With) all these collaborations with the medical community, we can define our focus to address the underlying molecular basis of human disease. The discovery will therefore have much more impact to the future diagnostics.

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"And we hope this will drive much more international companies to come collaborate with us and at the same time, we will spin off more and more local biotech which will eventually become successful.

"Hopefully in another 30 years, the local biotech companies, pharma companies will become a key driving force for Singapore's economy."

Speaking at the event, Mr Teo said the pharmaceutical sector could be facing challenging conditions and the way forward was for continued collaboration between companies and research players.

He said: "Companies in the pharmaceutical industry are facing a confluence of challenging market conditions, lower R&D productivity and a patent cliff that has resulted in a rationalisation of internal R&D.

"To accelerate drug discovery and development, many pharma companies are looking to collaborate with and tap on the R&D capabilities of other research players. We will therefore continue to sharpen our BMS and physical sciences capabilities to support and complement the industry."

According to the Economic Development Board, Singapore has committed S\$16.1 billion in continued support of research, innovation and enterprise activities between 2011 and 2015. A total of S\$3.7 billion is dedicated to enhancing existing R&D infrastructure, integrating multi-disciplinary research and translating basic science into tangible outcomes.

- CNA/hs



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