

Health Minister briefed on stem cell advances

By Francis Casperan

Adult stem cell application is forging new grounds in the medical arena - with treatment of heart disease, cartilage regeneration and is progressively being applied for various other degenerative conditions with possible cures for blood disorders and blood cancers.

In view of Malaysia's aim to boost its standing as the region's leading healthcare provider, Health Minister Dato' Liow Tiong Lai was recently given a briefing on the status of stem cell therapeutics in Malaysia.

The briefing in Kuala Lumpur was jointly hosted by three leading organizations in the medical and bioscience industry - HSC Sdn Bhd, Kuala Lumpur Sports Medicine Centre (KLSMC) Sdn Bhd and StemLife Therapeutics Sdn Bhd.

HSC Medical Centre Director and Consultant Cardiologist Dr Soo Chee Siong described how both locally and internationally, patients who have been treated with stem cells for cardiac conditions have made significant improvements.

"Hospital facilities from Germany, Korea, USA and Thailand have published significant data to show that cardiac stem cell therapy has had very positive effects for patients in certain stages of heart failure. This form of therapy presents a very exciting alternative for patients who have already exhausted all current forms of treatment for their condition," he said.

Opened in 2003, HSC Medical Centre is one of the world's leading One-Stop medical, heart and diagnostic centers, with internationally-trained medical professional, fully computerized system integration and state-of-the-art diagnostic and therapeutic equipment.

Director and Consultant Cardiologist, Dr Soo Chee Siong, pioneered stem cell therapies for patients with heart conditions in Malaysia. Since 2006, he has significantly improved the lives of patients inflicted with chronic heart disease by administering autologous peripheral blood stem cell therapy.

KLSMC Founding Director and Orthopaedic Surgeon Dr Saw Khay Yong emphasised the importance of stem cell application for joint injuries and spoke of pioneering groundbreaking studies into cartilage regeneration.

"International statistics show that many patients, of all ages, undergo some form of arthroscopic surgery for orthopaedic conditions," he said. In patients with articular cartilage degeneration, stem cell therapy may assist in delaying the need for a prosthetic knee replacement, a common end-solution offered to patients.

Dr Saw said, 'Compared to other publicised stem cell options offered overseas, what we offer here provides effective healing in cartilage damage at a fraction of the cost.'

KLSMC was founded with an emphasis on sports-related injuries and its two founders, Dr Saw Khay Yong and Dr Tay Yong Guan, brought with them considerable experience and expertise in General Orthopaedics with a focus on sports injuries, arthroscopic surgery and total knee replacements.

The Centre, through Dr Saw and his team of orthopaedic surgeons, has successfully applied stem cell therapy for joint cartilage degeneration in more than 90 patients since early 2007. Patients who have undergone the non-invasive procedure, utilising

stem cell coupled with hyaluronic acid, have shown significant improvement. The procedure is carried out post-arthroscopic surgery to assist in effective regeneration of damaged cartilage.

StemLife Bhd Chief Medical Officer Dr Aw Tar Choon provided an overview on the global perspective of stem cell application. "StemLife Therapeutics, in collaboration with leading medical specialists and comprehensive medical facilities, is in position to propel Malaysia as a centre of excellence in the region for therapeutic applications."

"Scientists and doctors have found new applications for stem cell regeneration through extensive research and I believe that there will be more to come. We're very excited that the minister has taken an enthusiastic interest in stem cell therapies and we look forward to establishing these new areas of application to both patients here and abroad."

Established in 2001, StemLife is Malaysia's first stem cell banking and therapeutic specialist and is a licensed cord blood stem cell banking facility, under the PHFS (Private Healthcare Facilities and Services) Act 1998.

The company has had an impressive proven track record of successful adult stem cell therapies for patients with cancer, leukaemia, diabetic related chronic wounds, heart disease and orthopaedic injuries.

StemLife has collaborated with the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanoscience and Nanotechnology Initiative (NUSNNI) on the interaction of novel nanofibers with bone-forming stem cells proved conclusively that stem cell technology can be applied as a treatment for muscles and bones.

The Health Minister concluded the briefing by stating: "It is my privilege and pleasure to have met with Malaysia's leading physicians in this field and patients who have undergone stem cell therapy for their various conditions."

"Scientists have hailed stem cells as the next major step in the battle against serious degenerative disorders such as diabetes and heart disease, for "regenerative medicine", treatment of genetic diseases and for some debilitating or lethal neurological diseases, such as Parkinson's and motor neurone disease."

"News reports and promotional material on websites often reassure us that this therapy is safe, which promises much hope for those unfortunate to be afflicted by these diseases."

"Having listened to the doctors and the patients, it is clear that adult stem cells which can be derived from the patient's own body is the way to go – it is safe, simple and effective. I hope that through this notable adult stem cell work, Malaysia will become a cost-effective medical tourism destination for patients everywhere."

"Instead of patients spending considerable amounts of money overseas for purported stem cell therapies conducted in an unregulated environment, patients should be aware that they now have a choice locally."

"To demonstrate the commitment of the Ministry, RM32 million was recently approved by the Cabinet for the Ministry of Health to further develop and strengthen the stem cell/cord blood banking activity."

"RM5.86 million was allocated for the setting up of a stem cell transplantation laboratory at Institute for Medical Research and RM18.87 million for the expansion of the public cord blood banking facility at the National Blood Bank and Sultan Abdul Halim Hospital, Sungai Petani."

"Another RM5.57 million will go to strengthen stem cell and bone marrow transplantation services at Ampang Hospital." **OH!**