Research centre gets $256m to fight cancer

AT 4AM yesterday, hours before the Cancer Research Centre of Excellence was to officially open, stemcell biologist Chan Shing Leng was running samples in the lab.

Six hours later, right after the centre’s opening ceremony, she was back at work.

“I don’t stay that late every day, just when there are a lot of samples,” she said with a smile.

There is a palpable energy in labs all over the new centre, which began setting up shop in March.

The lab will receive $256 million over seven years to fight cancer, the Asia-Pacific’s No.1 killer. The Ministry of Education and the National Research Foundation are providing a $172 million grant, while the National University of Singapore (NUS), which houses the centre, will offer the rest.

The centre aims to fast-track cancer research, transforming basic science into treatments for patients.

For example, its Translational Interface unit, a four-year-old lab which was rolled into the new centre, is already making inroads into personalised medicine that draws upon basic research.

First, the unit receives blood samples from cancer patients. Then, it analyses their DNA, and by the end of the same day, it can adjust their medication dosage according to their genotype.

Other programmes in the centre will study cancer stem cells, cancer biology and experimental therapeutics, which includes developing treatments that target specific cancer genes.

The centre will also delve into research on nose cancer, more formally known as nasopharyngeal carcinoma, which is the sixth most common cancer in men here. Leukaemia and lung cancer will also be studied.

“Although the focus of the centre will be on those cancers endemic to Asian populations, these advances will be relevant to cancers in other ethnic groups,” said centre director Professor Daniel Tenen, who is from Harvard Medical School in the United States and is now working at NUS.

Over the next seven years, Prof Tenen is aiming for the centre to improve patient care, produce quality research, train students and scholars, and attract pharmaceutical partners.

Currently, the centre has 125 research staff, including 18 principal investigators from Singapore, the United States, Japan and Europe. It plans to expand to 250 workers in the future.

It will also train 100 graduate students and 70 post-doctoral fellows in the next five years.

Both Prof Tenen and Harvard scientist Gary Gilliland, who is involved with the centre’s experimental-therapeutics programme, praised Singapore’s research infrastructure and strong funding support.

“It’s really our fault if we can’t produce good research in a generous funding environment,” Prof Gilliland said.

The new centre will also collaborate closely, rather than compete, with existing research institutions such as the National University Cancer Institute of Singapore and the National Cancer Centre, said Mr Koh Yong Guan, chairman of the new centre’s governing board.