Cancer detective hands over reins

Mimi Yu led ground-breaking study on links between diet, genetics and cancer

FOR nearly two decades, Professor Mimi Yu has been tracking the lives of more than 60,000 Chinese subjects in a ground-breaking research study that has shed new light on diseases such as breast and lung cancers.

But yesterday, the 58-year-old epidemiologist announced that she was stepping down as head of the Singapore Chinese Health Study, which she called her “third and youngest child”.

"After almost 20 years of being the principal investigator, it is time to leave it in capable hands," said Prof Yu, who is retiring from academia.

The announcement comes at the end of a remarkably productive time for Prof Yu. Launched in 1993, the study followed 63,000 Chinese Singaporeans and looked at the interaction between diet, genetics and cancer.

The largest-ever study of its kind on the Chinese race, it resulted in 55 peer-reviewed publications in world journals.

Among other things, it found a link between burning incense at home and lung cancer.

It also found that eating soy products daily can reduce the risk of breast cancer among Chinese women in Singapore.

In an interview with The Straits Times, the Hong Kong-born Prof Yu said the genesis of cohort study was "all about timing and who you know".

In 1989, she was carrying out a series of smaller studies in southern China and looking at starting the so-called cohort research in either Guangxi or Shanghai.

But on June 4 that year, hundreds of protesters were killed in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, driving Prof Yu to look for "a more stable Chinese community".

She settled on Singapore “because of its stability and supportive government”.

With a US$1 million ($1.5 million) grant from the US National Cancer Institute, she launched the study in 1993, but not before scouring Singapore for potential people to conduct door-to-door interviews.

While she still has a passion for research, Prof Yu decided it was time to hang up the cloak and move on after 30 years in academia.

“I want to work on social justice issues and perhaps the next step would be uprooting to Africa to work with the homeless.”

"After all, I know I would be leaving the cohort study in caring hands."

Prof Yu announced her decision at a scientific symposium to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The cohort study will now be headed by NUS Associate Professor Koh Woon Puay. "While it is not going to be easy to fill Mimi’s shoes, she has taught me much and I will do my best to walk in her footsteps," she said.

The macro picture

THE Singapore Chinese Health Study involved 63,000 Chinese subjects, making it the biggest research survey ever of the race. At the outset, it involved adults between the ages of 45 and 74 who lived in HDB estates.

Funded by a grant from the National Cancer Institute in the United States, the study was restricted to two major dialect groups - Hokkien and Cantonese.

Participants were enrolled between April 1993 and December 1998. They completed a baseline in-person interview that took place in their home. The session covered areas such as diet, physical activity, reproductive and medical history.

Principal researcher and epidemiologist Mimi Yu (top right) said the study generated a database on the eating habits of Singaporeans.

With that, researchers found a link between diet and cancer. They found that soy products reduce the risks of breast cancer among Chinese women and black tea could lower the risk of Parkinson’s Disease.

Since its inception, the Singapore Chinese Health Study has generated 55 peer-reviewed medical publications, 45 of which are related to cancer.