

# 400 scientists here to discuss immunology

EVEN the best tuberculosis drugs are powerless against a sub-population of bacteria that occurs in hard-to-treat cases.

Called non-multiplying drug-resistant bacteria, it is one reason why an estimated 1.5 million people died from the airborne disease in 2006.

In Singapore, along with many other countries, tuberculosis has been given increased attention as an infectious disease. Four people are diagnosed with TB here every day.

A scientist at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine has found a possible way to tar-

get the drug-resistant bugs.

Dr Sylvie Alonso, in collaboration with the Novartis Institute for Tropical Diseases in Singapore, has found one biochemical pathway – a chain of chemical reactions – to be very important in enabling the bacteria to survive.

By targeting this pathway, drugs can be developed to kill the bacteria by stopping this chemical reaction from taking place.

Dr Alonso will be presenting her findings to some 400 scientists at a two-day symposium which starts on Monday.

A total of 20 speakers, 10 of whom are flying in from the United States, the Unit-

ed Kingdom, Australia and France, will be attending the second annual scientific meeting, organised by the Singaporean Society for Immunology.

The president of the society, Professor Mike Kemeny, says the group was formed in 2007 to bring together the immunology community from the various research institutions here and link them up with their international counterparts.

The immune system acts as the body's police officer, preventing disease from harming the body, he said.

"It's an important factor that prevents us from getting cancer. And when the immune system is compromised, our risk of

getting cancer goes up," said Prof Kemeny.

Besides tuberculosis, other diseases which will be discussed at the symposium include asthma, arthritis, cancer, malaria and hepatitis B.

The immune system has been implicated in all of these diseases.

One immunology professor from University College London in Britain, Professor Arne Akbar, will be talking about the ageing of the immune system.

Prof Kemeny is hoping to collaborate with Prof Akbar to find out what causes this process.

**LIAW WY-CIN**