

Doc-scientists get grants to do research

Award supports 6 who do investigative work while seeing patients

WHEN severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) hit in 2003, epidemiologist Mark Chen was a young doctor at the Communicable Disease Centre at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

As the new virus took its hold on Singapore, the then 31-year-old watched his colleagues fall prey to the deadly disease.

To add insight into such phenomena, Dr Chen has been given a research grant to study how infectious diseases like Sars and influenza are spread within a hospital

environment.

He is among six recipients of this year's Clinician Scientist Award, which supports doctors doing cutting-edge research while still seeing patients.

"We knew from the time that we were hit with Sars that we had to be better prepared for the next epidemic," Dr Chen said.

He will develop computer simulations that model the transmission of such diseases inside hospitals, and hopes to study local transmission of Influenza A (H1N1) if or when it occurs.

The annual award has been given out by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research and the Ministry of Health since 2004.

About 30 projects have been awarded grants so far.

They are given to Singaporeans or per-



Epidemiologist Mark Chen will use his research grant of up to \$225,000 a year for three years to study how infectious diseases like Sars are spread within hospitals. ST PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

manent residents doing work based here, and recipients are assessed first by international scientists in the same field, then selected by a panel of medical and scientific experts.

This year's grants, announced yesterday, will give the six recipients up to \$350,000 each year for three to five years.

They will spend up to 70 per cent of

their time doing research, and the rest of the time attending to their patients.

Besides funding research, the sum helps make up for what each doctor would have earned from seeing patients full-time.

Associate Professor Tai E Shyong, 42, is a repeat grant recipient. In 2005, he received the award to study factors that contribute to diabetes, high cholesterol

The winners

THIS year's Clinician Scientist Award recipients:

Senior investigators, who receive up to \$350,000 annually for five years:

- Oncologist Joseph Wee of the National Cancer Centre Singapore
- Endocrinologist Tai E Shyong of the National University Health System (NUHS)
- Obstetrician and gynaecologist Mahesh Choolani of the NUHS

Investigators, who receive up to \$225,000 a year for three years:

- Gastroenterologist Ling Khoo Lin of the Singapore General Hospital
- Liver specialist Dan Yock Young of NUHS
- Epidemiologist Mark Chen of Tan Tock Seng Hospital

and obesity, and this year's award allows him to continue his work.

Clinician-scientists can contribute a valuable perspective to research, he said.

"For clinician-scientists, it's easier to contextualise what you're doing for science, as (seeing patients) helps you identify key problems you may want to focus on in your work," Dr Tai added.