

Scientists find better way to treat stomach cancer

SCIENTISTS in Singapore have discovered a more effective way of treating stomach cancer and boosting the long-term survival rate of patients.

They have found that, instead of a “one-size-fits-all” method of treatment, they can possibly tailor treatments according to what caused the cancer.

To do this, they have first come up with a way of classifying stomach cancers by the signals the cancer cells give off when they grow and spread.

The research that yielded this finding

came from a study of more than 300 gastric tumours in patients from here as well as in Australia and Britain.

The findings of the study, to date the largest on cancer genes that produce gastric cancers, were published online in the peer-reviewed science journal, PLoS Genetics.

Known as a silent killer, stomach cancer claims more than 866,000 lives worldwide every year. The World Health Organisation rates it as second only to lung cancer among the top killer cancers.

Here, more than 600 people are diagnosed with it every year, and about

400 die from it in that time. It is the fifth killer cancer among men, and the seventh among women.

Dr Ooi Chia Huey, a research fellow at the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, explained that the team found three cancer-causing “pathways”, or ways in which cancer cells pass information among themselves to regulate their growth and death rates.

They also found that more than seven in 10 of the tumours examined here featured a combination of two or three of these pathways, making it unproductive to predict how the disease will progress

in any given patient just by classifying them using a single pathway.

Dr Ooi added: “With the current treatment, patients are all treated the same. Some may develop a resistance, resulting in the tumour not shrinking in size. Survival rate is also not very good.”

Less than a quarter of patients now make it past five years after surgery and chemotherapy.

Dr Patrick Tan, the senior author of the study, said the findings mean there is potential for designing personalised treatments for patients.

Dr Ooi said animal trials to validate

the findings of this study will begin soon; it will take another two years before clinical trials on human patients can begin.

But Professor Soo Khee Chee, an oncologist at the National Cancer Centre, cautioned that it is still early days, and that the researchers could still find the various sub-classes of stomach cancer may respond to surgery and chemotherapy differently.

He called for a study of a larger group of patients, which should throw up a clearer picture, so that individualised treatments can be designed for each patient.