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Media Statement

WA AND CHINA TEAM-UP TO TARGET LIVER DISEASE

Western Australia's relationship with China has the potential to reach further than the mining boom, as our scientists work together to find solutions to a growing, global demand for liver transplants.

Visiting Associate Professor Aibin Zhang has joined with Professor George Yeoh and his team at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) to conduct vital research into new treatments for liver disease, as part of a partnership between The University of Western Australia (UWA) and Zhejiang University.

UWA Professor George Yeoh said the collaboration would focus on improving current dialysis methods for liver disease, which could help relieve a huge health burden in China and make this treatment more feasible in WA.

"In China, around 10 per cent of the population is affected by hepatitis B – a cause of liver disease which equates to 120 million people, and most of those will end up on a transplant waiting list, being treated with a labour and cost intensive 'bioreactor' dialysis system," he said.

"We are now working together to use WA breakthroughs and make these systems more efficient, to help China treat millions of people and make the treatment more available to WA patients."

A bioreactor works in a similar way to a kidney dialysis, the machine replaces the function of the diseased liver and can often cure patients as it give the liver a chance to regenerate naturally – the machines must be constantly replenished with artificially created liver cells.

Associate Professor Aibin Zhang, who has been researching liver cells in China for more than 10 years, said he was given a fellowship to join the WAIMR team because of their development of unique cells which could hold the key to a new wave of treatments.

"Professor Yeoh's team at WAIMR created unique liver progenitor cells (LPC's) which produce important liver cells – if we can find a way to keep these cells functioning in a bioreactor, we expect they will sustain the machine for months or even longer, compared to just days, as it is now," he said.

"The facilities WAIMR has are world-class, and I look forward to working alongside Professor Yeoh and his team of scientists, and to bringing my family to Perth, making it our home for two years."

WAIMR Director Professor Peter Klinken said it was a privilege to host A/Prof Zhang and facilitate this vital research.

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“By developing their unique LPCs, Professor Yeoh’s team has positioned themselves as world-leaders in the field and this is testament to the impact they are having on a global scale,” he said.

A/Prof Zhang was awarded one of six National Health and Medical Research Council fellowships for cross-collaboration between Australia and China and will work within Professor Yeoh’s team for two years.

Associate Professor Zhang, based at the Medical School, Zhejiang University in Hangzhou won the Rising Star Scientist award in the Province of Zhejiang three years ago.

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