



MALAYSIAN SCIENTIST AWARDED RM11.3 MILLION TO PROPEL INNOVATIVE BREAST CANCER RISK STRATIFICATION AND COMMUNICATION APPROACHES IN DIVERSE ASIAN POPULATIONS

- *8-year research programme funded by the Wellcome Trust Career Development Award is a first for Malaysia, led by Associate Professor Ho Weang Kee and co-hosted by the University of Nottingham Malaysia and Cancer Research Malaysia.*

Semenyih, Selangor, 31st January 2024 – Dr Ho Weang Kee, Associate Professor of the Faculty of Science and Engineering at the University of Nottingham Malaysia, has been awarded a prestigious Wellcome Trust Career Development Award (WTCTDA) totalling GBP £1.92 million (RM11.3 million) to develop novel breast cancer risk stratification and communication methods in diverse Asian populations.

The highly competitive award is an initiative of the Wellcome Foundation, a UK-based charitable foundation established in 1936, that funds research to support new discoveries in science across various disciplines that aim to improve human life, health and wellbeing. The award acknowledges and offers funding to mid-career researchers with the potential to emerge as international research leaders.

Co-hosted by University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM) and Cancer Research Malaysia, the 8-year research programme is dedicated towards enhancing the accuracy of breast cancer risk prediction models tailored to the unique genetic and environmental factors prevalent in diverse Asian populations and to build innovative risk communication methods.

In the lead up to International Day of Women and Girls in Science (11 February 2024), the award is also a significant reminder and celebration of the scientific contributions by and for women, as well as showcasing how equitable scientific development benefits all members of the society.

Addressing research gaps in risk assessment

Empowering women to make informed decisions about screening and prevention by informing them about their future risk of developing breast cancer can help reduce inefficiency, unnecessary cost, and potential harm caused by over-diagnosis. However, development of such risk assessment tools requires large-scale research data, which is not available in many Asian ethnic subgroups.

Dr Ho plans to leverage the award to refine breast cancer risk assessment in Asian population through developing innovative methods to harness valuable insights from existing, less powerful datasets in underrepresented populations.

“The aim of this 8-year research programme is two-fold: to develop and apply advanced statistical techniques to harness the value of existing, less powerful datasets to build disease risk prediction models for under-represented populations, and to extract disease risk-

associated medical imaging features to enable visualisation of risk. The plan is to start with breast cancer and expand to other non-communicable diseases in the future” said **Dr Ho**.

“This research programme is rooted in the foundational work of the Malaysian Breast Cancer Genetics Studies, the largest breast cancer study in Malaysia established by Cancer Research Malaysia. Supported by a collaborative network of partners from the UK, US, Singapore, and our home base in Malaysia, alongside our esteemed members of the Healthier Lives Research Cluster at UNM, we have laid a robust foundation for our ongoing research initiatives. I am confident that this award will empower us to further strengthen these collaborations, engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders to determine the most effective strategies for disease control in our region”, said **Dr Ho**, also the co-director of Healthier Lives Research Cluster at UNM.

On the importance of funding cancer research, **Professor Datin Paduka Dr Teo Soo-Hwang, OBE, Chief Scientific Officer at Cancer Research Malaysia** added that, “This award recognises Dr Ho’s scientific brilliance and the impact of her leadership on cancer research. Dr Ho has already led pivotal studies on genetics in Asian breast cancers and advanced our understanding of how to accurately predict risk and how to use this information to ensure appropriate screening strategies in Asians – this way will enable us to develop these discoveries into tools that can impactfully change outcomes in the community.”

With research being a key area for UNM, the university is actively seeking out potential donors, sponsors, and partners for research collaboration and support. The equal sponsorship and partnership between UNM and Cancer Research Malaysia in driving transformative impact demonstrates UNM’s ongoing dedication to research agendas that address the critical challenges of the modern age, for a healthier, more sustainable, and resilient future.

“We are proud to note that the Wellcome Trust’s Career Development Award is the first-of-its-kind to be awarded in Malaysia. Our commitment at the University of Nottingham Malaysia has always been to advancing research and knowledge exchange, spearheading collaborative initiatives such as with Cancer Research Malaysia, and also fostering interdisciplinary partnerships. Fundamentally, we aim to address pressing real-world challenges locally, regionally, and at the international level”, said **Professor Ir Dr Mohd Shahir Liew, Vice Provost of Research and Knowledge Exchange (RKE) at University of Nottingham Malaysia**.

- END -

About University of Nottingham Malaysia

The University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM) offers a distinctly British education in an Asian setting with a legacy as the first overseas campus of a UK university to be established globally. UNM is recognised for its excellence in teaching and learning, as well as the outstanding student experience offered on its 48-hectare campus just an hour south of the KL city-centre. UNM's extensive and diverse research community develops solutions that tackle key global challenges in the areas of food, health, the environment, sustainability, and socio-economic issues within the ASEAN region. The University of Nottingham is ranked Top 100 in the QS World University Rankings 2024 and is rated 'Competitive' in the new SETARA 2022 rating system by the Government of Malaysia. Established in 2000, UNM has over 4,000 students from 74 countries with 15,000 alumni working with the world's top 100 global brands.

About Cancer Research Malaysia

Established in 2000, Cancer Research Malaysia (CRM) is the country's first and only independent and non-profit cancer research organisation. Funded entirely by donations and research grants, it conducts cancer research to find better ways to improve survival, focusing on Asians. In the breast cancer research programme, CRM has led the first and most comprehensive study building a risk-stratified approach for screening in Asian women, which allows more efficient and equitable screening and prevention to Asian women at higher risk of breast cancer. In addition, CRM has led the largest study of genomic profiles of Asian breast cancers, which provides critical insights into treatment and survival in Asian women. This has led directly to the development of the first investigator-led clinical trial to test new therapies in Asian breast cancer patients. Since 2014, CRM has established a nurse and community-led programme which has transformed the survival of underserved Malaysian breast cancer patients. For more information, please visit website at www.cancerresearch.my

Cancer Research Malaysia's work is entirely supported by grants and donations. For those interested to support the work of Cancer Research Malaysia, donations can be made to CRM at www.cancerresearch.my/donate.

For media queries, please contact:

University of Nottingham Malaysia

Sarah Soo
Sarah.Soo@nottingham.edu.my
Tel: (60) 12 778 4886

VoxEureka

Ben Lee / Alexandria Pinto
unm@voxeureka.com
Tel: (60) 17 382 3823 / (60) 12 253 5910

Cancer Research Malaysia

Liyana Jamaludin
intan.liyana@cancerresearch.my
Tel: (60) 11 565 25072