

Global health milestone: single-dose pill for sleeping sickness gains EU support

A new oral drug that could simplify treatment for sleeping sickness has received a positive scientific opinion from the European Medicines Agency (EMA), raising hopes for faster elimination of the deadly disease in Africa.

The medicine, Acoziborole Winthrop, developed by the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi) in partnership with Sanofi, is designed to treat gambiense human African trypanosomiasis, the most common form of sleeping sickness. The EMA's Committee for Medicinal



Products for Human Use recommended the drug as a single-dose oral treatment of three tablets for adults and adolescents aged 12 years and older.

Sleeping sickness, transmitted by infected tsetse flies, can be fatal if untreated as the parasite eventually invades the central nervous system.

Experts say the single-dose therapy could replace longer, complex treatment regimens and support the World Health Organisation's goal of eliminating the disease by 2030. Sanofi has pledged to donate the medicine to WHO for distribution in affected countries.

The growing challenge of rare tumours — and the centres built to treat them

DR TAREQ SALAHUDDIN

Rare cancers are often overshadowed by more common malignancies such as breast, lung, or colorectal cancer. Yet collectively, these uncommon diseases represent a significant portion of the global cancer burden. At the 3rd SingHealth Peritoneal Surface Oncology Conference in Singapore, specialists gathered to discuss advances in the treatment of complex abdominal and rare tumours.

Among the key speakers was Associate Professor Johnny Ong, Head and Senior Consultant of the Department of Sarcoma, Peritoneal and Rare Tumours (SPRinT) at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) and Singapore General Hospital (SGH). In an interview with The Daily Star, Dr Ong explained why rare cancers require specialised expertise and how dedicated centres are improving patient outcomes.

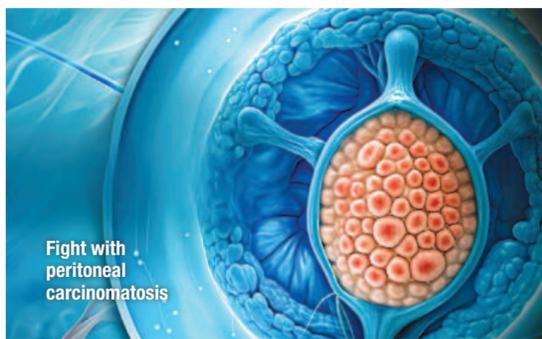
Rare cancers are typically defined as those affecting fewer than six people per 100,000 population. However, when all rare tumour types are considered together, they account for roughly 20 to 25 percent of all cancers, creating what Dr Ong describes as a paradox: individually uncommon but collectively widespread. Because each specific tumour is encountered infrequently, many physicians may see only a few cases in their careers, making diagnosis and management particularly



Associate Professor Johnny Ong, Head of SPRinT Programme at the NCCS and SGH

challenging. To address this gap, SingHealth established the SPRinT programme in 2019, bringing together surgeons, oncologists, researchers, and allied specialists to focus on the treatment and research of rare cancers through coordinated multidisciplinary care.

The programme treats a wide spectrum of complex cancers, including soft tissue sarcomas, peritoneal surface malignancies, skin cancers, gastrointestinal stromal tumours, and advanced abdominal cancers. Unlike many other cancer services that are organised by organ systems, rare tumour care often crosses anatomical boundaries. Surgeons treating these diseases must therefore be comfortable operating across multiple organs and working closely with other specialists. Research has shown that patients with rare cancers achieve better outcomes when



Fight with peritoneal carcinomatosis

they are referred early to expert centres that see these conditions regularly.

One of the major cancers treated by the SPRinT team is sarcoma, a tumour arising from connective tissues such as fat, muscle, or blood vessels. Sarcomas can occur almost anywhere in the body and often present as a painless lump. Because they may initially resemble benign growths, they are sometimes overlooked until they become large or symptomatic. Dr Ong emphasises that the first surgery is crucial. If a tumour is not removed properly at the initial operation, the chances of recurrence increase and subsequent treatment becomes far more difficult.

Another important area of focus is peritoneal surface malignancy, a condition in which cancers spread to the lining of the abdominal cavity. The peritoneum acts like a thin membrane surrounding the organs of the abdomen, and tumours from many organs—including the stomach, colon, ovaries, and liver—can spread to this surface. According to data presented by the SPRinT team, about 40 percent of gynaecological cancers, 25 percent of gastric cancers, and roughly 15 percent of colon cancers may eventually spread to the peritoneum. Because these tumours originate from different organs, their treatment requires highly specialised surgical and oncological expertise.

Early detection remains one

of the greatest challenges. Many patients visit multiple doctors before receiving the correct diagnosis. To help primary care physicians recognise potential sarcomas, the SPRinT team encourages referral if a lump is larger than five centimetres, grows rapidly, lies deep within tissues, or causes pain. Investigating suspicious lumps early, Dr Ong notes, is always safer than waiting until the disease progresses.

Research and innovation are also central to the programme's work. The team collaborates with laboratory scientists and pharmaceutical partners to explore new drug targets, conduct clinical trials, and better understand tumour biology. Because rare cancers have historically attracted less research attention, these efforts are essential to expanding treatment options.

Beyond treating patients in Singapore, the programme also serves as a regional training hub. Surgeons from across Asia participate in workshops, fellowships, and conferences to learn specialised techniques for managing rare tumours. For Dr Ong, increasing awareness among both doctors and the public is key.

Rare cancers may be individually uncommon, but together they represent a large group of patients who deserve specialised care, early diagnosis, and access to the latest advances in cancer treatment.

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STUDY FINDINGS Obesity linked to higher risk of severe infections

Adult obesity significantly increases the risk of severe infections and infection-related deaths, according to a large international study published in The Lancet. The research suggests that around one in ten infection-related deaths globally may be linked to obesity, highlighting a growing but often overlooked public health concern.

The multicohort study analysed data from more than 540,000 adults from Finnish population studies and the UK Biobank, tracking hospitalisations and deaths related to infectious diseases over more than a decade. Researchers examined the relationship between body mass index (BMI) and the risk of severe infections caused by bacteria, viruses, parasites, and fungi.

Results showed a clear dose-response relationship, meaning the risk increased with higher levels of obesity. Individuals with severe obesity faced nearly three times the risk of hospitalisation or death due to infections compared with people of healthy weight.

The findings were consistent across a wide range of infections, including respiratory, gastrointestinal, and skin infections. Scientists say obesity may weaken immune defenses through chronic inflammation and metabolic disturbances.

With global obesity rates continuing to rise, experts warn that addressing obesity could also reduce the burden of infectious diseases worldwide.



Bangladesh's CHRF wins prestigious Wellcome grant to study severe viral pneumonia in children

STAR HEALTH REPORT

Bangladesh's Child Health Research Foundation (CHRF) has received a prestigious Wellcome Discovery Award to investigate severe viral pneumonia in children, marking a significant milestone for the country's biomedical research landscape.

The award, funded by the UK-based charitable foundation the Wellcome Trust, will support an ambitious seven-year study examining how respiratory viruses interact with immune cells in the nose; the body's first line of defense against infection.

Pneumonia remains one of the leading causes of child mortality in Bangladesh. A key focus of the research will be Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), a major driver of hospitalisation and severe illness among young children.

Led by Senjuti Saha of CHRF, the project will collaborate with researchers from Boston Children's Hospital to study virus-host interactions using advanced tools such as single-cell genomics and nasal mucosal organoid models.

Researchers hope the findings will shed light on why some children develop life-threatening pneumonia while others experience mild illness; insights that could inform better prevention, diagnosis and treatment strategies for respiratory infections in Bangladesh and globally.



Empty clinics, ailing villages: Bangladesh's quiet rural health crisis

PROFESSOR DR MOHAMMAD ANISUR RAHMAN FORAZY

Bangladesh is widely recognised as a global success story in public health. Over the past few decades, the country has made remarkable progress in reducing maternal and child mortality, expanding immunisation coverage and increasing life expectancy. International organisations often cite Bangladesh as a model for community-based healthcare initiatives. Yet beyond these achievements, a quieter crisis continues to unfold across rural Bangladesh.

Across thousands of villages, community clinics and rural health centres stand as symbols of an ambitious healthcare vision. Built with substantial public investment, these facilities were meant to bring essential medical services closer to people living far from urban hospitals. Each community clinic was designed to serve roughly 6,000 villagers, providing primary consultations, maternal and child health services, immunisation, family planning counselling and treatment for common illnesses.

On paper, the model aligns closely with global public health principles such as Primary Health Care (PHC) and Universal Health Coverage (UHC). If fully functional, these clinics could form the backbone of Bangladesh's rural healthcare system.

In reality, however, many clinics remain closed for long periods or operate only sporadically. Residents in several rural



A closed non-functional community clinic

areas report that healthcare personnel are frequently absent. Doctors rarely visit, and trained nurses or health assistants are often unavailable. Even when clinics open, shortages of medicines and basic diagnostic tools limit the services that can be offered.

For villagers, the consequences are serious. When illness strikes, the nearest functioning health facility may be several kilometres away, often requiring costly transport to reach an upazila health complex or district hospital. For low-income rural families, such journeys can be both financially and physically burdensome.

The situation is particularly challenging for vulnerable groups. Pregnant women may miss essential antenatal check-ups, elderly patients struggle to manage chronic illnesses and children with infections risk delayed treatment. Minor health problems that could have been treated locally often escalate into more severe conditions.

Bangladesh has invested heavily in rural healthcare infrastructure, but

buildings alone cannot deliver care. A functioning system requires trained health professionals, reliable medicine supplies, diagnostic services, effective supervision and community engagement.

International experience shows that strengthening the role of nurses and community health workers can significantly improve primary healthcare delivery. In countries such as Thailand, Brazil and Rwanda, nurse-led clinics have successfully expanded access to essential health services.

Bangladesh has already demonstrated its ability to innovate in public health. Revitalising community clinics through better staffing, consistent medicine supply and stronger accountability could transform these facilities into vibrant healthcare hubs.

After all, healthcare systems should be judged not by the buildings they construct, but by the care they deliver to the people they serve.

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Global partners launch \$54m effort to boost maternal nutrition in Africa

A new multi-country initiative aimed at improving maternal health and nutrition across Africa has been launched with an initial investment of \$54 million from the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF).

The programme, named NOURISH, was unveiled in Addis Ababa during the African Union Summit and is being led by Nutrition International in partnership with UNICEF, Sight and Life and several African governments.



NOURISH aims to strengthen antenatal care systems and expand access to essential micronutrients for pregnant women across the continent. The initiative will initially focus on eight countries, beginning with Ethiopia and Rwanda.

Health experts say improved maternal nutrition is critical in sub-Saharan Africa, where about one in three pregnant women suffers from anaemia and low birthweight remains a leading cause of newborn deaths.

By aligning financing, technical expertise and service delivery behind national health plans, the programme seeks to reach at least four million women directly by 2030 while strengthening health services for millions more.

Study links e-cigarettes to higher blood pressure risk

STAR HEALTH DESK

Smoking traditional cigarettes or using e-cigarettes may significantly raise the risk of high blood pressure, according to new research that adds to growing concerns about nicotine use. The study suggests that people who smoke or vape are more likely to develop both elevated blood pressure and clinical hypertension compared with those who avoid nicotine products.

The research, published in The American Journal of Physiology – Heart and Circulatory Physiology, analysed health data from 6,262 adolescents and adults aged between 12 and 80 years in the United States. Participants were part of the National Health and Nutrition Examination

Survey conducted between 2021 and 2023.

Scientists found that individuals who smoked or vaped had a 34 per cent higher risk of abnormally high blood pressure and a 46 per cent greater risk of hypertension than those who used neither product. Among participants, about 19 per cent reported using nicotine products: 12.6 per cent smoked cigarettes, 4.1 per cent used e-cigarettes, and 2.3 per cent used both.

Researchers also observed that nicotine users tended to have higher cholesterol levels, more body fat and greater levels of inflammation; factors that can worsen heart health. The findings suggest nicotine exposure, whether from cigarettes or vaping devices, may influence blood pressure

partly through its effect on cholesterol and blood vessel function.

While the association was strongest for traditional smokers, the study noted that vaping alone may still carry cardiovascular risks, although the smaller number of exclusive vapers in the sample limited statistical certainty.

Health experts say the results challenge the common belief that vaping is a harmless alternative to smoking. The World Health Organisation has previously warned that the growing popularity of e-cigarettes is fueling a new wave of nicotine addiction, particularly among young people worldwide.

Researchers say further studies are needed to understand the long-term health effects

of vaping. However, the findings highlight the importance of stronger public health measures to reduce nicotine use and protect young people from potential cardiovascular harm.

