

On the trail of skin cancer gene

Scientist finds gene behind cancer's self-healing ability

By LOOK WOON WEI

INSTANCES of self-healing skin cancer were first reported in 1934 after they were discovered in a family of Scottish coal miners.

More than 70 years later, Associate Professor Bruno Reversade and his team were able to identify the gene responsible for their self-healing properties.

Prof Reversade has also discovered a similar strand of self-healing skin cancer in a Tunisian family.

He was among the 15 speakers at the European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO) Gold Medalist Symposium 2015 held this week at Biopolis.

He told an audience at the symposium how, over five generations, 27 of the family's members have been affected by this strand of cancer, leading to the conclusion that such self-healing cancer is hereditary.

Understanding why and how the gene works is the main pursuit of the senior principal investigator's team at the Institute of Medical Biology, which is run by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star).

Prof Reversade, who also spoke about self-healing cancer, told The Straits Times: "We want to harness the healing properties of this gene on other cancers."

The three-day symposium was jointly organised by A*Star, EMBO and Nanyang Technological University.

Every year, EMBO awards a gold medal to a top European scientist under the age of 40 who has

made significant contributions to the field of molecular biology.

There were 13 gold medal winners speaking at the symposium and Professor Philip Ingham, chairman of its organising committee, said: "This is a great opportunity for a new batch of students to benefit from the medallists' sharing."

Speakers presented research ranging from cellular rearrangements to vaccine design.

The latest Gold Medal was awarded last year to Associate Professor Sophie Martin of the Department of Fundamental Microbiology at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

Prof Martin, 40, who spoke at the event, was awarded the Gold Medal for her work in understanding how the organisation of cells contributes to cell size and cell division.

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Associate Professor Bruno Reversade has identified the gene in two strands of self-healing skin cancers, and is working on understanding it more thoroughly. PHOTO: AGENCY FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND RESEARCH