

\$424m offer for his firm, but inventor-doc says no

Singapore creator of sought-after blood pressure device aims to take company further

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MUNICH: A Singapore doctor-cum-inventor of medical gadgets is being courted by pharmaceutical giants at the ongoing European Society of Cardiology Congress.

These big boys are keen on buying over his HealthStats International company because of his invention – a watch-sized blood pressure monitor that takes readings of the wearer's central aorta, the largest artery in the body.

The companies would like control of his company and its product because the United States Food and Drug Administration has told them that it would fast-track the approval of their new hypertension drugs if these medicines can be proven to improve blood flow in the aorta.

But general practitioner Ting Choon Meng is not biting at offers of US\$300 million (S\$424 million) to buy his company, which makes the BPro gadget.

"I'm not selling. I want to develop it further," he said of his company, which already has 10 patented medical devices.

The patented BPro has drawn good reviews. It is the only non-invasive device that takes readings of blood pressure in the central aorta. This has been proven in

several trials to be a much better indication of how well the heart and brain are working because the readings are taken from nearer the heart, the seat of the hypertensive patient's problem.

Conventional blood pressure readings taken from the arm measure blood pressure in a blood vessel in the arm.

There are other devices that can take readings of blood pressure in the central aorta, but BPro is the only one that is non-invasive and easy to use.

The 3,000 euro (S\$6,260) watch-like device, besides being a highlight at Dr Ting's booth, is also enjoying a high profile at the huge booths of pharmaceutical big boys Servier and Novartis.

HealthStats staff there are using it to measure visitors' central aorta blood pressure to show the 23,000 cardiologists at the five-day meeting that having a "healthy" blood pressure from conventional readings might be deceptive.

What is more important is having an "elastic" aorta – and it is the degree of this elasticity which BPro measures.

Servier and Novartis have drugs that promise to improve the pressure in the central aorta.

Dr Ting said BPro is being used by drug companies during clinical trials on their drugs' efficacy, as well as by doctors on patients. BPro can do both a spot measurement as well as track pressure readings over 24 hours.

Professor Bryan Williams of the University of Leicester, a fan of the device, is best known for showing why two drugs that claim to lower blood pressure can have different benefits.

In his study, more than 2,000 patients



Dr Ting's watch-sized blood pressure monitor is the only non-invasive device that takes readings of blood pressure in the central aorta. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

were split into two groups, with each given one type of drug.

One group fared significantly better than the other, although both had their blood pressure brought down to similar levels.

Prof Williams explained: "Drugs we use to lower blood pressure have very different effects on the cardiovascular system. These effects cannot always be appreciated from the simple measurement of blood pressure."

After having used more complicated and invasive methods to measure the pressure in the central aorta for his clinical trial, he sees the convenience of using BPro.

Dr Ting said he is on the verge of signing agreements for BPro to be used in three major clinical trials. He is also in talks with two other large drug companies which are planning trials for their drugs.

The Singapore doctor has just completed two small trials in the United States involving 60 patients, a project that earned him US\$300,000.

That was an early trial for a new cancer drug. The company wanted to be sure that its drug had no adverse effects on the central aorta before pouring more money into large trials to test its cancer-fighting abilities.

For Dr Ting, the offers he is getting are attractive. But even more alluring is his success, which has given him ample funds to chase his dream – inventing more devices to improve patient care.

This was how his HealthStats International came to be. He had set out to find out why some of his hypertension patients were faring better, though they appeared no different from others on paper.

The rest is history.

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