

Four men behind made-in-S'pore penile implant.

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Tiny implant, the work of British inventor, Hongkonger and two Singaporeans, raises hope for men with erectile dysfunction

THE world's smallest and cheapest penile implant made the news recently with a Singapore company being the only one in the world to reproduce it commercially.

But conceiving it took several years and four people - a British inventor, a Hongkong-born neurosurgeon, and two Singaporean veterans in the biotechnology business.

The story behind the penile implant, which caught the public's eye at a sexology conference a fortnight ago, harks back to 1987, when the Hongkong-born **Dr Timothy Lee** arrived at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, England, for neurosurgical training.

There he met and worked with prominent scientist Giles Brindley, who had invented, among other things, a microchip implant to help spinal-injury patients regain bladder and bowel control.

In 1990, Dr Lee returned to Singapore with his Singaporean wife, but maintained ties with his mentor.

Dr Brindley flew over a couple of times to help him start the microchip implant programme, using implants made in Britain.

Their foray into business started when an American firm bought over the marketing rights to the microchip device, and started charging more than double the price.

'It became quite unaffordable for Asian patients,' said Dr Lee, 45, now a senior consultant neurosurgeon with his own practice at Gleneagles Hospital.

'So two years ago, I suggested to Dr Brindley, why not produce it here at a much lower cost for Asian patients? We can also modify some problems in the previous prototype,' he told The Straits Times.

Dr Brindley, 76, decided to give it a shot. 'Economic conditions in the European Union, though favourable for big businesses, are very unfavourable for smaller ones,' he said in an e-mail interview.

Dr Lee got two local friends on board as well, and the four-man outfit was born. Micro Implant's first product was a refined version of the microchip implant, which it prices at about \$3,000 - a steal compared to the \$13,000 to \$14,000 of the older version.

But, as Dr Lee pointed out, a company cannot survive on just one product.

Three months ago, they began work on the penile implant - yet another brainchild of Dr Brindley -

which has since been tested on two local men. They are reported to be coping well.

The penile implant works through a pump implanted in the scrotum. One squeeze is all it takes to release a drug dosage into the penis, stimulating an erection.

The device, which could benefit more than two-thirds of men suffering from erectile dysfunction, is 20 times smaller and more than four times cheaper than conventional ones, which cost about \$9,000.

Also on the cards is an electronic device to help patients suffering from chronic pain, revealed Dr Lee.

While Micro Implant has plans to market its products regionally, details have not yet been firmed up.

It is still early days yet, and the firm is starting modestly, he stressed.

Undoubtedly, like the penile implant produced here by a contractor in Eunus Technopark, they hope to rise to the challenge.

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