



SICKNESS RETORT: Colette Sims, Dr Wayne Best and Dr John Horton at Epicchem's laboratory.

Picture: RICHARD POLDEN

Lab joins killer disease fight

By NICK BUTTERLY

A HI-TECH laboratory that opened in Perth on Thursday is up with the leaders in the fight against Third World disease.

Perth company Epicchem's new drug discovery facility at Murdoch University is conducting research into a range of diseases, from cancer to AIDS.

Epicchem managing director Dr Wayne Best said 80 per cent of work undertaken by the lab was done on behalf of other drug companies.

But the company was working on its own drugs and compounds. Dr Best said Epicchem was refining a substance to fight African Sleeping Sickness and its South American relative, Schaggs's Disease.

Both are parasitic conditions that affect hundreds of thousands of people — as well as livestock — in mostly poor, rural areas. There is no cure.

Dr Best warned that treatment was still a long way from the market, saying it could take between five and eight years before it was available.

"We are just getting to the stage where we are trying to get a major pharmaceutical company interested," Dr Best said.

Epicchem is 80 per cent owned by listed WA company Echo Technologies.

The remaining 20 per cent is owned by the researchers.

Dr Best said the lab was one of the best in the southern hemisphere.

"We spent about half a million refurbishing the lab and about \$250,000 on state-of-the-art equipment," he said.

The equipment gave Epicchem speed and accuracy that made the company attractive to large pharmaceutical companies wishing to fast-track the development of their drugs.

"The equipment will enable us to produce the same number of new drug compounds in a month that other laboratories take a year to produce," Dr Best said.

Echo hopes Epicchem eventually will earn big export dollars for the state and become a key player in the burgeoning biotech sector.