Chief Minister, Clare Martin, today announced the signing of an agreement between the Northern Territory Government and the United States National Cancer Institute (NCI) to collect and screen samples of marine organisms in the search for anti-AIDS and anti-cancer drugs.

"This potentially life saving research initiative is significant for the Territory, recognising the importance of our bio-resources such as marine organisms, as well as the scientific expertise at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory," Ms Martin said.

"Scientists from the Museum will undertake this important health research for the NCI in co-operation with the Coral Reef Research Foundation (CRRF), a Guam based organisation.

"Importantly, participation in this program will also result in an increased knowledge of the Territory’s marine biodiversity."

The program involves the collection and screening of samples of marine organisms, such as sponges and soft corals, to test for new pharmaceutical compounds with curative or preventative properties for cancer and AIDS.

The agreement may result in royalties for the Territory if an extracted compound from the NT is licensed to a pharmaceutical company for production and marketing.

Dr Barry Russell, Assistant Director, MAGNT said samples would initially be collected from Darwin Harbour.

"Darwin Harbour has a very rich marine fauna, for example there are estimated to be at least 400 species of marine sponges in the Harbour alone. Less than 1 kg of each species is required for screening and there will be little impact on the local ecology," he said.