Med school with strong tech touch

New school’s focus will include innovating devices

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SINGAPORE’S third medical school will produce a different breed of doctors from the two other schools here.

Its graduates will be trained to tap cutting-edge technology such as robotics to treat patients, said Nanyang Technological University (NTU) president Su Guanming.

The school will not only train the best clinicians, but will also be at the forefront of innovating medical devices and improving health care, he added.

It will be jointly managed by London’s Imperial College, which is ranked among the top three medical schools in Britain and among the world’s top five.

The school will also work closely with NTU’s engineering department, which has a decade-long track record of producing medical devices together with the Singapore General Hospital.

NTU proposed setting up a medical school two years ago. Its go-ahead was announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at Sunday’s National Day Rally.

Dr Su said the new school will help retain bright Singapore students who, unable to get into the medical programme here, go abroad to do it - and often do not return.

With the pedigree the school will have from being twinned with Imperial College, it will not play second fiddle to the existing medical schools, said Dr Su.

Its graduates will be conferred a degree from both universities.

The two medical schools here are the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School.

NUS will hit its maximum enrolment of 300 next year, while Duke took in 56 last year.

The Imperial-NTU tie-up will be for an initial 18 years. For its first venture, Imperial will send 10 professors here and shape the curriculum.

NTU provost Bernd Andersson said the school plans to also recruit “top-notch” teachers from here and around the world, and that the curriculum will include classes on business, so students will know the nuts and bolts of managing health-care costs.

Much of the clinical training will be done at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH). Dr Lim Su-tat Wun, who heads the National Healthcare Group (NHG) to which TTSH belongs, said: “NHG keenly wants to involve the other clusters and other providers too.”

The students will spend at least their first year on the NTU campus and the bulk of their next four years on the yet-to-be-built campus next to TTSH in the Moulin territory.

Anchoring the new school will be a historic building, now disused but to be refurbished.

Dr Su said NTU and Imperial College are a good fit, not only because both are strong in engineering, but also because 15 per cent of the NTU faculty comes from Imperial. One of them, Professor Andersson, hopes Imperial’s vibrant culture of commercialising its technological innovations in medicine will be replicated here.

Education Minister Ng Eng Hen said the new school is free to focus on devices and technology, so long as it produces “good doctors Singaporeans can trust.”

It will start with 50 students in August 2013 and build up to 150 a year over five years.

Dr Ng said the decision to have 150 students a year was based on projections of the health-care demands of an ageing population. He added, however, that the additional 150 doctors a year - which already makes for a large medical school - will still not meet the country’s needs, so foreign-trained doctors will continue to be recruited.

More than 200 foreign-trained doctors have been hired this year.

Dr Ng, a surgeon by training, said: “Training doctors is intensive and requires individual attention, because you have to teach clinical skills.”

Aside from TTSH, the school also hopes to work with other hospitals, such as the Kho Teck Puat Hospital in Yishun.

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