Students hone their skills on mannequins that can breathe, have heartbeats, bleed or even give birth. Trainers control the "patient's" vital statistics and watch from an adjacent room, behind a two-way mirror. PHOTO: IMPERIAL COLLEGE LONDON

"What we need to ask is, would the experience with the doctor be the same if the patient was his mother; if he was being filmed?

If we can't say yes with the doctors we produce, then we have failed."

Professor Martyn Partridge (below), senior vice-dean at the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, set to open in 2013. He is also deputy director of medical education at Imperial College London’s Faculty of medicine, and its Chair in respiratory medicine.

Nanyang Technological University has teamed up with the world-famous Imperial College London to set up a new medical school in Singapore. The Straits Times looks at the ambitious plans for the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, and how it aims to create doctors who put their patients first.

BY CHANG AI-LEEN
SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

WHEN Singapore’s newest medical school opens its doors in two years, it will have simulated operating theatres, robotic and telesurgery suites, and the best in e-learning, to equip students with all the medical skills the latest technology can impart.

But at its heart, the curriculum aims to put service back into medicine, producing doctors people want to be treated by.

"What we need to ask is, would the experience with the doctor be the same if the patient was his mother; if he was being filmed? If we can't say yes with the doctors we produce, then we have failed," said the school’s senior vice-dean Martyn Partridge.

"Not only should they understand the science of disease and the appropriate investigations, but also they must have a sense of partnership with the patient, and always be thinking about how the healthcare service is organised to make it most convenient and comfortable for him or her."

The Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, set to open its doors in 2013, will be Singapore’s third medical school. It is a partnership between Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Imperial College London – one of the world’s top universities.

Set up to train more doctors for Singapore’s growing and greying population, the school will eventually have 350 students a year.

It is the first time Imperial is developing and delivering a course overseas.

Professor Stephen Smith, founding dean of the new medical school, said building it from scratch represents an exciting opportunity to innovate.

"There is a lot of interest among faculty because of the opportunity to develop a new curriculum. We can take what’s good and transport it back to the Imperial system," said Prof Smith, who is also Imperial’s pro-vice (health).

Three Cs of medicine

CREATING the right doctors will start with choosing the right students. Applicants will have to go through about seven interviews within a day, conducted by not only doctors and academics but also, say, communications specialists, teachers and medical students.

The process will be even more demanding than those at Imperial’s medical school, where a panel of three professors and a medical student interview candidates and decide who make the cut.

Applicants to the new school will be chosen from diverse backgrounds, including polytechnic students.

The idea is to give individual interviewers different expertise. The flexibility to probe deeper and look for qualities essential to being a good doctor.

This is because interviews conducted by single panels may fall short when it comes to picking students who go on to do well in medical school, and there is increasing doubt about the value of personal statements and teachers’ reports.

Prof Partridge, who is also deputy director of medical education at Imperial’s faculty of medicine, and its chair in respiratory medicine, believes that choosing those with soft skills on top of intellectual ability shows will mean fewer headaches later on.

Doctors with poor bedside manners are far more likely to generate patient complaints, studies have shown. When they show empathy, patients are more likely to click to their treatment plans.

"We want students with the Three Cs – compassion, commitment and understanding of medicine as a career," said Prof Partridge.

Once they make it through, students will also have a voice in shaping their curriculum and even in choosing new medical students.

Professor Jenny Higham, deputy principal and director of education at Imperial’s medical faculty, stressed that the new school would incorporate the best of Imperial’s curriculum: "What we’re very clear about is this: this is not going to be a second-best medical school that ramps up the rest of the students who couldn’t make it elsewhere."

"The best thing about a medical degree in Imperial is that the students are never bored. They have a broad education. They work hard and play hard. That’s what I want for the new school as well."

To help those with the passion for medicine but not the deep pockets for school fees, the school will provide financial help and scholarships.

NTU recently received a record $400 million donation, through government matching of a $100 million donation from the Lee Foundation – founded by the late philanthropist Lee Kuan Yew, and $75 million will go into an endowment fund for scholarships and financial aid for needy students.

Plans by Imperial to almost triple fees to $9,000 ($18,000) a year in London next year will have no effect on fees at the medical school here, Prof Partridge assured, as this stems from changes to higher education funding in Britain and applies only to British and European undergraduates studying in London.

Tuition fees for the new medical programme are yet to be announced, but are not expected to differ much from those at the National University of Singapore, where Singaporean medical students pay about $20,000 a year.

Acting the part

A CORE part of the curriculum could be modelled on the communications skills course at Imperial, with students honing their skills on actors playing to be patients, who are trained to give them feedback.

Students take the structured course over five years, and their encounters are filmed and discussed. They learn everything from how to introduce themselves, how to show they are listening, and how to give information to the patient, said Dr Tanya Tinney, course leader in clinical communications at Imperial’s department of surgery and cancer.

Actor Noreena Jones has been playing a patient in mock classes since 1994, assuming roles as medical professionals and vari...