Trainees honing their colorectal surgical skills by practising on the large bowel of a pig.

DR LOVE:

Long-term caring

Exposure to chronically ill over long period will help students get feel of disease

WITH people living longer, many are affect-ed with chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Doctors see the same patients for years, tweaking treat-ments as their ailments change over time.

Students at Singapore’s new medical school will start their exposure to such pa-tients early; each following at least one pa-tient for several years as he progresses through the course.

Who they see could range from the elderly to newborn babies, said Professor Mar-tyn Partridge, senior vice-dean of the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine. They would also keep long-term portfolios of the patients.

Such an experience will hopefully help them see past the disease. For example, home visits to someone with chronic obstruc-tive pulmonary disease, one of the most common long diseases, would high-light how the ailment affects the patient’s life, from fighting for breath while climbing the stairs to struggling to do everyday tasks like bathing. They would also gain insight into how it affects the patient’s family.

The student, shadowing a doctor, will also follow a patient who has certain symp-toms for several years, starting off with the symptoms and working backwards to under-stand the scientific basis of the condition.

“They could learn everything from com-munication to behavioural science and com-pliance all through one patient,” said Prof Partridge, who is also Professor of Respira-tory Medicine at Imperial College London – which is partnering Nanyang Technological University to set up Singapore’s third medi-cal school.

Care for the patient would extend far be-yond giving out medicine, he stressed.

Such comprehensive care will be in even greater demand in the coming years, as Sin-gapore’s ageing population means there will be more cases of chronic diseases and pa-tient disability. By 2030, one in five people here will be aged 65 and above.

Prof Partridge said: “The idea of follow-ing a patient over a long period is to give the student a feel of the disease, its impact and how its progression is affected by fac-tors such as social inequality. With long-term diseases, the doctor’s emphasis has to change to support the patient, as the patient learns to self-manage his or her own condition.”

This has to be done in a personalised manner. For instance, he said, studies have shown that 15 per cent of patients in Britain have impaired health literacy. So a priority for doctors would be to check that people understand prescription instructions and warnings, and are clear on how to reduce the impact of their condition. This might in-volve giving the patients advice in the form of pictures rather than words.

Projects for the students would include the improving of processes. For example, they could visit polyclinics to study how long patients wait and the reason for delays – whether it is because the doctor was de-layed or the pharmacy took a long time to dispense prescriptions – and come up with ways to improve the situation.

“As future doctors, these are things they should be thinking about – the whole total-ity of care,” he said.

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