‘More funding needed’ for Traditional Chinese Medicine

Research in S’pore lagging, while job prospects still a concern for TCM graduates

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SINGAPORE — A lack of funding has resulted in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) research in Singapore lagging behind that in other countries, while job prospects remain a concern among local TCM undergraduates.

These are some issues plaguing the TCM industry, seven years after the Government opened up TCM as an area of undergraduate study.

Last year, former Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan had even spoken about TCM playing a bigger role here — with the possibility of setting up a TCM specialist register.

A former Member of Parliament, Professor Hong Hai, who is also a registered TCM physician, said more research will better substantiate its role as an alternative to evidence-based medicine and will help convince the public of its effectiveness.

Prof Hong, the former chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee on Health, was speaking at a TCM symposium yesterday organised by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Chinese Medicine Alumni Association.

Speaking to reporters later, he said: “There hasn’t been much (research) funding made available to TCM (as) most of the funding has been directed to conventional medical research. (It is) also the fault of TCM practitioners who have not paid much attention to research ...

“With more graduates skilled in the sciences, more people available to do scientific research in TCM, I hope there will be appropriate funding for them.”

Prof Hong also noted that the expertise in research methodologies of TCM research is not yet quite on par with that of Western medicine and more training in TCM research is needed among both practitioners and students.

At NTU, there have been two batches of students who graduated with a double degree in TCM and biomedical sciences.

The latest statistics show that among the first batch of 59 graduates, 35 went into the TCM field, taking on positions ranging from inventory to practitioners.

However, employment prospects are still a cause of worry for students to whom Prof Hong spoke.

Third-year TCM-biomedical sciences undergraduate Teo Chun Huat said that the number of graduates from the TCM institutes along with the small number of employers resulted in a competitive job market.

The chairman of the NTU Chinese Medicine Alumni Association, Ms Karen Wee, agreed that there is a “saturated” job market for TCM graduates but said their second degree in biomedical sciences opens up other pathways in management or research.

The Minister of State (Health), Dr Amy Khor, who was the guest of honour at the symposium, said there is a strong presence of TCM here but noted that local TCM research is still behind that in other countries.

She said that there is a need to be open in conducting more research (on TCM treatment) and encouraged the TCM community to look into niche areas of research that reflect the local population needs.

“Although TCM and Western medicine are etched in different philosophies, research findings can provide a common language for the public to understand which TCM therapies have been proven to be safe and effective,” she said.