A shot in the arm for chronic illness care

New academy lets medical students learn in community setting

By SALMA KHALIK
SENIOR HEALTH-CORRESPONDENT

WITH the growing number of people suffering from chronic ailments, how health care is provided has to change to keep these people out of hospital, said Mrs Tan Ching Yee, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health.

To do this, Singapore needs a strong primary care sector to look after them for the rest of their lives, Mrs Tan said at the official opening of the Family Medicine Academy at Bukit Batok Polyclinic yesterday.

"We will need to look after people with chronic conditions, help them manage well so that they can enjoy a good quality of life," she said.

The academy – the first of its kind in Singapore – will enable medical students to do practice-based learning, especially in the area of chronic ailments, in a community setting.

The launch of the academy is timely, with polyclinics now treating more patients of a younger age group for chronic ailments.

At the National Healthcare Group's (NHG) nine polyclinics, people aged between 45 and 74 now account for 62 per cent of chronic patients, up from 56 per cent just five years ago. There are 240,000 chronic patients in this age band, up from fewer than 200,000 in 2005.

Good, continuous health care spanning decades can help younger patients suffering from chronic ailments to lead a normal life, Mrs Tan said.

The academy also has a clinical skills laboratory where students can practise on life-like dummies and volunteers. There are also five large consultation rooms where students can practise being doctors.

Because of its location, they also get to interact with patients and workers at the polyclinic.

The academy will start with a batch of 54 students from the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKCMedicine), who will spend a week there in their first semester.

Associate Professor Wong Tack Yee, assistant dean of family medicine at the school, said that teaching students in a community setting would help them to appreciate the work of doctors as nurses in providing primary care.

Apart from the one-week introductory course in their first year, the students will also track a chronic patient for two years to know what the patient goes through, and spend a day every fortnight in a clinical setting.

They will be posted to polyclinics as general practitioners and GP clinics in their fourth and fifth years, he said.

Professor Chew Yam Ching, head of the NHG, said more than 70 of the group's clinician educators are "deeply involved in shaping the LKCMedicine's curricula" for the students, together with two partners – the Nanyang Technological University and Imperial College London.

Mrs Tan said: "We hope this early exposure will leave a deep imprint on the students and encourage more to pursue a path in family medicine."

The academy is also open to students of the other two medical schools in Singapore – the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School.

salma@stタイムs.com.sg

www.facebook.com/ST.Salma