Healing hands, helping hands

Exhibition features humanitarian efforts by doctors and nurses

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

It is a curriculum aimed at encouraging doctors to treat their patients as much with their hearts as with their heads.

For the past two years, three out of four of the 132 students at Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine have been mutually providing humanitarian aid. Some have gone on missions to Cambodia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, and some have been helping patients at Dover Park Hospice on weekends.

Yesterday the school, which is part of Nanyang Technological University and Britain’s Imperial College, launched a Humanity in Medicine exhibition highlighting such efforts by doctors and nurses.

School dean James Best said: “We talk of medical education as developing knowledge, skills and attitudes. In a lot of medical education, the attitude part has been neglected. We don’t want to neglect building the character of our doctors through developing the right attitudes.”

Opening the exhibition, Dr Lam Pin Min, Minister of State for Health, said: “The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.”

An ophthalmologist by training, Dr Lam has taken part in many such missions in his eight years as a doctor in the air force. He is also trained in aviation medicine. He was part of the United Nations peacekeeping force in East Timor when it achieved independence in 2000.

Dr Lam also volunteered to bring back an injured serviceman from Alaska in May 2001. The trip home took 42 hours, during which time he had to stabilise and monitor the patient. He also brought back passengers injured in the Singapore Airlines crash in Taiwan in 2000.

He highlighted many efforts by local doctors such as performing cataract operations to restore sight and repairing cleft palates in countries where such treatments are not available or too costly for villagers.

Professor Lee Eng Hin of the National University Hospital and a board member of the medical school said all public hospitals support staff who provide humanitarian aid.

Dr Lam said he is encouraged to see the school has modules in its curriculum to inculcate “a sense of compassion and humanity in the practice of medicine”. Towards the end of their third year, the medical students will have six weeks to do something different related to their studies – be it research or humanitarian aid, overseas and locally.

He said the school “inspires student doctors to become doctors who provide care they would like and appreciate for themselves”.

Aside from efforts by doctors such as emergency medicine doctors Tham Kunn Ying and Fatimah Lateef, the exhibition features philanthropists like Tan Tock Seng who built a “pauper’s hospital” in 1844 and provided over 1,000 coffins for those who could not afford one.

Shawn Tan, 20, was one of 12 students who visited villages in Cambodia to teach good hygiene to youngsters and first aid to village elders. He said: “We put talcum powder on the children’s hands to show how easily germs can be spread.”

Student Candice Loh, 19, plans to go to Batam “once every four months during my school holidays” to continue the work her team had started, such as health education and sanitation projects. She would also like to identify other needs the community had, so that she and her fellow students can help.

Second-year student Berwyn Tan, 19, said his stint in a Sri Lankan village was an “excellent opportunity to learn about myself and the healthcare problems faced by communities in other countries”.

After two months, the free exhibition will be moved to schools and hospitals around the island.