

Patients come first at Singapore's new medical school

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LONDON: When Professor Freddy Boey's 90-year-old mother goes for her regular eye, diabetes or heart check-ups, he or his siblings take at least half a day's leave to accompany her.

"Apart from disrupting our work, it takes a toll on an elderly person to make these frequent trips just to see the doctor for five minutes. And by the time I'm her age, there will be many more people like my mother," he said.

The incoming Nanyang Technological University (NTU) provost hopes to address this with Singapore's new Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, a tie-up between NTU and Imperial College London, one of the world's top universities, which is set to open in Singapore in two years.

"The doctors we hope to produce will be knowledgeable of what technology can do for the patient to help improve their quality of life," he said.

Making sure the patient comes first will be top priority at Singapore's new medical school, and technology will be one way of enhancing comfort and convenience for patients.

This could include remote check-ups via videoconferencing, or using portable devices to monitor health at all times and sound the alarm when a diabetic's blood sugar is out of whack, for instance.

Above all, the school wants to produce doctors who care.

As the Lee Kong Chian School's senior vice-dean Martyn Partridge put it: "Pa-

tient care will not just be lip service. It's the doctor's job to think about the whole totality of care, not just give out prescriptions.

"These will be the sort of doctors that you and I would want to be treated by, and we want this ethos right from the beginning."

To make sure students with heart are chosen, candidates will go through a stringent selection process. Multiple interviews could be conducted not just by doctors, but also other health-care professionals such as nurses, as well as academics, medical students and the lay person.

And as part of the course, undergraduates could be asked to follow individual patients over several years – say an old person with a chronic illness, or a newborn baby as it grows, to give them a better understanding of the patient as a person.

Communication skills will also be a core skill honed during their studies – under consideration is a programme where students practise on actors trained to exhibit all manner of symptoms and behaviours.

Underlining its commitment to the project, Imperial College last Friday opened an office at its South Kensington campus, to act as a link between London and Singapore, manage project and curriculum development, and give the school a presence in Britain.

Professor Partridge, who is also deputy director of medical education at Imperial's Faculty of Medicine and its chair in respiratory medicine, said that among Imperial staff, the interest in being part of the new school has been "phenomenal".



This conservation building next to Tan Tock Seng Hospital will be the base for Singapore's third medical school. The school, jointly managed by Nanyang Technological University and London's Imperial College, is expected to open in 2013. ST PHOTO: BRYAN VAN DER BEEK

This is the first time that Imperial is putting its brand in another institution to share in an educational programme, said the university's rector Keith O' Nions.

"For NTU and Imperial, this is a real prize, and it wouldn't be possible unless we shared the same high academic standards," he said.

The founding dean of the new school, Professor Stephen Smith, said that he and his team had hit the ground running, and good progress had been made towards the 2013 opening of the school.

Recruitment is under way for the 50 or so key positions in the school, and it is expected that about 20 appointments will be filled in the next six months.

Prof Smith, who is also Imperial's prorector (health) added: "There has been a lot of interest from the bottom up, because of the opportunity to develop a novel curriculum from scratch. It's a tremendous opportunity for anybody who has a keen interest in education."

On a more strategic level, the partner-

ship is also a chance for Imperial to spread its wings globally.

"We believe that the modern universities of the next 10 to 15 years will have deep and meaningful global connections," he explained.

He was among more than 20 people who attended the opening ceremony of the 12th-floor office, overlooking landmarks such as the London Eye, architect Norman Foster's Gherkin building and The Shard – London's tallest building under construction.

The guest of honour, Singapore's High Commissioner to Britain Michael Teo, told The Straits Times that the tie-up would produce high-quality doctors modelled after Imperial's top-notch programme.

"It's not an easy thing getting two schools and two cultures together, and we could not have picked a better partner," he said.

NTU president-designate Bertil Andersson, the Singapore representative

Partnership between NTU, Imperial College

THE Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine is a partnership between Nanyang Technological University and Imperial College London.

Set up to train more doctors for Singapore's growing and greying population, the school will open in 2013 and eventually have 150 students a year.

Singapore's two other medical schools are the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School.

The Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine recently received a record \$400 million donation, the largest to a tertiary institution in Singapore.

This came from government matching of a \$150 million donation from the Lee Foundation – founded by the late philanthropist Lee Kong Chian, who believed in the importance of education and research.

Half of the \$150 million will go into an endowment fund for scholarships and financial aid for needy students, while the other \$75 million will go to another endowment fund for the advancement of medical education and clinical research.

who has driven the project from its onset, was also in London for the opening.

"We will have doctors educated with the help of one of the world's best institutions, yet they will be educated in Singapore and (be) Singapore-centric," he said.

"Those who want to treat people in Singapore, especially the old, must understand the Singapore context.

"This is not so much for NTU, it's for the people of Singapore."

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