

Quality Medical Education

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at Bandar Saujana Putra on 10 September 2012*

In our 55 years of independence, Malaysia has done well in improving the health status of the population. Life expectancy at birth of males and females has increased from 55.8 years and 58.2 years respectively in 1957 to 71.7 years and 76.5 years in 2009. Similarly during the same period, the various specific mortality indicators have declined significantly. Our health care system has been very robust and has received accolades and special mention from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other countries especially with regards to our rural health services and primary care. Primary Care is the thrust of our health care system, supported by secondary and tertiary care. We have a comprehensive health system which includes curative and rehabilitative care, encompassing preventive care at the level of the individual and promotive care operating at the level of society at large. We therefore need many players from various sectors to help us maintain and enhance our health agenda.

Coupled with this pronouncement, is the changing health care scenario globally, including our own country. The changing pattern of diseases with more lifestyle diseases encroaching our shores, increasing consumer expectations, globalisation and liberalisation, the exponential growth of medical technology, the advent of new medical innovations including stem cell therapy and molecular and genomic medicine. I am also mindful of the need to ensure quality medical education and excellent health care providers to prepare us for the challenges of today and the future.

Malaysia therefore requires the services of health care providers who are well trained and well mannered. They must be beyond reproach. They must be professionals who are ethical and who put the welfare and care of their patients above everything else. Patient safety is paramount and must be practiced at all times.

The vocation of health care is not for everyone although we know that many students aspire to become doctors. Students with excellent grades do not necessarily become good doctors. The brightest students may not end up becoming the best carers. Also, not everyone with an excellent academic record wants to be a doctor. Sadly, many are forced or coerced to take up Medicine by parental or peer pressure or for less noble reasons, like seeking for glamour or financial rewards. The good doctors are those who are competent, caring, compassionate, have the right aptitude, attitude, values and who are motivated to provide service above self.

My advice to aspiring doctors is to make sure you have the passion and a genuine interest to take care of the sick, at whatever costs, and are prepared to toil and sacrifice, irrespective of time and space, in order to be transformed into reliable and trustworthy health care providers.

Once the right students go into medical schools, they must get the right training. All medical schools and those offering allied health sciences must ensure they provide quality education. Adhering to the basic requirements for accreditation may not be enough. It would be far better to benchmark the quality of our medical education with the best medical schools in the world. Once we have achieved that, there may no longer be a necessity to send our students abroad as they can get equivalent or better medical education locally. It is my fervent hope that our medical schools get serious about offering high quality medical education, not only for Malaysians but also for foreign students who seek quality education in our country.

Smaller schools which are struggling to maintain high standards or keep up with the competition for various reasons, ranging from a dearth of good medical educators, resources or financial challenges, should either merge with the more established ones or wind up. Fewer medical schools offering high quality medical education would be a far better strategy than having too many offering substandard education. Although the Government has approved these schools in the past, it is with the understanding that they conform to all the stringent requirements and do not make compromises. The time has come for us to right size the medical schools or merge some of the smaller players to avoid the fallacy of having too many offering too little.

To enhance our services to our patients, we need a good team of dedicated health care providers. These include doctors, nurses, assistant medical officers and other allied health professionals, each fully aware of one another's strengths and limitations.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) should forge genuine formal relationships with proven private medical schools to ensure a win-win situation. There must be enough training opportunities, interested and willing specialists, committed staff and proper facilities. Private medical institutions, on the other hand, can provide specialist care in smaller public hospitals that are presently short of resident specialists and the MOH can assist by upgrading their facilities especially the operation theatres to cut down the backlog of cases for minor surgery and emergencies. There are many private sector specialists who are experienced clinicians and teachers. Surely they can be roped in as trainers, if they are keen.

Training and retraining of academic staff is imperative to ensure they keep abreast with current knowledge and skills. Our students must learn to think on their feet and be self-motivated and self-directed learners, assisted by experienced and qualified academic staff.

Medical schools must seriously re-examine their curriculum not only to impart medical knowledge and clinical skills but also psychosocial skills, communicative skills, interpersonal and people skills to help their students become good healers as well as safe and competent clinicians.

Any academic institution worthy of its name must have a sound and formidable track record of innovative research i.e. research that can shatter established theories and offer new scientific evidence to improve therapeutic options. Private medical schools must invest in research to be at par with their public counterparts. Funding can be set aside for approved

research that will make a difference to health outcomes or trigger new drug discoveries and innovations.

The future is bright for education in Malaysia and more and more of our students can get now get access to tertiary education. They have ample choices, thanks to the many dedicated public and private institutions that we now have. Also more and more foreign students are flocking to Malaysia in their quest for good quality education, excellent infrastructure, friendly people and a safe and healthy environment.