

NUS medical school sees greater diversity in intake

It wants doctors with right values and skills to better handle challenges in healthcare

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Singapore's oldest and largest medical school now has students with more diverse academic backgrounds to better deal with healthcare challenges, following changes in the way applicants are evaluated. Associate Professor Chong Yap

Seng, dean of the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, told The Straits Times in an interview that in recent years, more polytechnic graduates and students from a wider range of junior colleges are being admitted.

The school admitted 280 out of some 2,000 applicants this year. Around 40 per cent of incoming freshmen are from junior colleges that are not among the top-ranked.

Prof Chong attributed the trend to

the rising calibre of JJC and polytechnic students and to a new admission system, saying: "Selecting students for medical school should not be just about grades, but about whether they have the right skills and values to be good doctors."

Singapore's chief health scientist and executive director of the Health Ministry's Office for Healthcare Transformation yesterday echoed this emphasis on skills and values in a commencement speech.

Addressing this year's NUS medical school graduates, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan said they should not focus overly on becoming narrow specialists.

As patients age, they develop multiple medical conditions, and their health and well-being are also affected by social, economic and environmental factors. This shows the importance of holistic patient care.

"There is clearly a tension between this need and the trend towards greater medical specialisation... My hope is that you would not overly focus on becoming narrow specialists but keep yourself sufficiently grounded in broader-based medical practice," he added.

"There is a crucial and growing role for good family physicians and generalist doctors, and I hope you would consider these as compelling

options for the future."

Prof Tan, a former NUS president, also addressed the concern that trust in general is diminishing and trust in experts is being eroded.

He found this worrying as the doctor-patient relationship, the effectiveness of the healthcare system and the partnership between the health professions and society at large are grounded on trust. "It is therefore critical that all of us in the health professions work on this together, to actively contribute to building trust with our patients and the wider community," he added.

Factors like empathy are key. NUS' medical school assesses applicants beyond grades, and evaluates them on attributes such as empathy and teamwork via a series of interviews. They are also tested on how they make judgments in real-life scenarios. Shortlisted students get interviewed at several stations, with doctors, nurses and even people posing as patients speaking to them.

"Doctors should not come from just one segment of society. It is good if they come from different

backgrounds and bring different strengths," said Prof Chong, who took over as dean in January.

The school is also introducing courses in areas such as health informatics, social determinants of health and health economics to nurture doctors who can adapt to new knowledge, interventions and changing patterns of illness.

"There are many challenges facing Singapore's healthcare system. But the key to overcoming these challenges lies in nurturing compassionate, competent and innovative future doctors," said Prof Chong.

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