

An old, unsolved issue - Nation | The Star Online



IT'S still happening. Years ago, the Higher Education Ministry's (MOHE) crackdown almost wiped out unscrupulous overseas medical colleges and their agents. But now they're resurfacing, Asia Metropolitan University president and chief executive officer Prof Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan (*pic*) says.

"Some charge a pittance for their courses. What can they offer with such low fees? Definitely not quality education," he argues.

The Federation of Private Medical Practitioners' Associations Malaysia president Dr Steven Chow and its founding member Dr Milton Lum have also heard of many medical students in foreign universities with poor SPM, STPM or equivalent qualifications – results that wouldn't have gotten them admission to a science course in Malaysian universities, let alone medicine. Sadly, some of them may even be on scholarships or bursaries from state or federal agencies, they say.

"Graduates – particularly those from three overseas universities – take longer than two years to complete their

housemanship, thus causing a clog in the system. This further contributes to the waiting list for housemen training,” they point out.

Recently, Universiti Malaya medical faculty dean Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman called for an independent task force to look into the critical glut of medical graduates and the issue of their questionable quality while Malaysian Physicians for Social Responsibility president Datuk Abdul Hamid Abdul Kadir urged the Government to remove substandard foreign medical schools from its list of recognised schools to address the large number of graduates.

Dr Tharmaseelan says the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC) and Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) regularly inspect Malaysian medical schools to ensure that every student either has the minimum grades or a Non-Objection Certificate (NOC). Medical schools here face severe penalties if they admit unqualified students but the same cannot be said for those overseas, he sighs.

Quoting the Health Ministry’s 2014 statistics, Dr Tharmaseelan, who is also the MMA and Medico-Legal Society of Malaysia past president, says there were more than 2,000 doctors with below par minimum qualifications who entered medical school, yet were doing their housemanship. More than 30% failed to complete their training.

“When the matter was raised with the MMC, the council argued that anyone who qualifies from a recognised medical college – even if he or she didn’t achieve the minimum entry grades – is guaranteed a place in government hospitals. And anyone who graduated from over 1,000 unrecognised medical schools abroad – despite not having the minimum entry grades – is allowed to sit for an entry exam and be trained as housemen upon passing,” he explains.

MOHE’s minimum entry requirement for medical school is five B4 credits in SPM science and math subjects. MOHE must issue an NOC to every student who pursues a medical degree without the minimum grades. Yet many who go overseas don’t have the certificates. It’s pointless to forge NOCs as many have entered medical schools abroad without them, he shrugs.

Urging parents not to force their children to do medicine, Dr Tharmaseelan says the high dropout rate during housemanship proves that not everyone pursuing a medical career has the chops to become a doctor. Medical students must have aptitude, attitude and empathy, he feels. Otherwise, it’s just a monumental waste of money and effort.

“Medicine must have the highest dropout rate among all professional courses. Most medical schools don’t conduct interviews or aptitude tests for students prior to admission. Academic results alone aren’t enough.”

The country will have more than 50,000 doctors by the end of this year. The only way to accommodate all future graduates is if the moratorium on medical colleges is maintained, and strict adherence to minimum grades and NOC issuance are observed, he offers.