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Medical Education in Malaysia

I attended the 13th Asia Pacific Medical Education Conference on the 15th and 16th of January 2016 in Singapore. It was organised by the National University of Singapore and took place at the University Cultural Centre, which has a large, well-equipped hall where the main talks were held, as well as a number of smaller rooms for concurrent sessions. I had only learned of this conference when I met Professor David Gordon, President of the World Federation for Medical Education, at the World Medical Association meeting in Moscow last year.

The World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) is based in France and is a non-governmental organisation for medical education. Its role in this field is officially recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO). It is a partnership organisation for the world's regional associations for medical education. WFME does not concern itself with the details of how medicine is taught, but more with the quality, management, organisation, support and delivery of medical education.

Over the past 15 years, WFME has had three main initiatives, namely setting standards for medical education, accrediting and recognising the accrediting agencies and compiling a directory of the world's medical schools. Their website address is <http://wfme.org>.

Before I get back to why WFME may be important to us, let me digress to the state of Malaysian Medical Education. One of the sessions at the APMEC meeting concerned the commodification of medical education. Broadly speaking, this means taking something that is thought to have no commercial value and making it into something that is a commodity – that is, something that does have commercial value. Traditionally, medical training was treated as more of a calling than a commodity. The experienced and skilled doctors took the students under their wings and guided them till they became full-fledged doctors. Of course, things were never quite that ideal, but of late it can be seen that business is intruding into the field of medical education and with it all the metrics and outcome measures that hard-headed business people demand. Gone are the days of producing idealistic, passionate practitioners. Now, what is in demand is a homogenised, pre-packaged generic doctor.

Malaysia has been the “beneficiary” of what seems to me a particularly virulent form of medical course commodification. In a decade or so the number of private medical programmes has far outnumbered the public courses, and many of them are now competing frenziedly for students. Apparently the demand for medical courses is (finally!) declining, and we can anticipate that competition will become more acute, and more colleges will fail or merge. While such natural selection might be good for the system as a whole, it will of course cause major problems for enrolled students of troubled schools. One way forward, which I believe some schools are already exploring, is to attract international students.

Attracting international students to study medicine in Malaysia will not be easy. While the relatively safe environment, good infrastructure and excellent food might be “pull” factors, the deciding element will be whether these students will be able to practise anywhere else but in Malaysia with their degrees. If the degrees are recognised by foreign medical councils, then

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there is no problem, but the vast majority do not get automatic recognition – usually there is some sort of examination to pass.

One such examination, which many Malaysians are familiar with, is the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) examination. This examination has to be passed by anyone with a foreign medical degree who wants to work in the United States. Thus, a foreign student who gets a Malaysian degree would have to sit for and pass the ECFMG examination in order to be eligible to work in the United States.

However, the ECFMG recently announced a rather momentous change. From 2023 onwards, only those doctors with degrees from an appropriately accredited medical school will be allowed to sit for the examination. What does “appropriately accredited” mean? Basically, it means that the medical school must be accredited through a formal process that uses criteria comparable to those established for US medical schools by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education or that uses other globally accepted criteria. The question then arises, of course, as to what “globally accepted criteria” might be. This is where we come back to the WFME.

In March 2013, the ECFMG announced that the WFME, in collaboration with the Foundation for the Advancement of International Medical Education and Research

(FAIMER), had developed a Programme for Recognition of Accrediting Agencies. If the accrediting agency goes through this programme successfully and gets recognition, then the graduates of any medical schools it accredits will be able to sit for the ECFMG examination.

At present, only four accrediting agencies have gone through the WFME-FAIMER process. Malaysia's accrediting agency is not one of them. I am well aware of issues of national pride, but in an increasingly globalised economy with a mobile workforce, it may be counterproductive. It is easy to say that we should be the judges of what are acceptable standards for medical schools in our country, but in the interests of our students and in the cause of greater transparency, our accrediting agency should consider obtaining international accreditation for itself – walk the talk, as it were. The national accrediting agency will still set national standards, but by having international recognition, it will bring added value to its clients.

The private medical education sector in Malaysia is headed for tough times and restructuring. Active collaboration at national and international levels on accreditation and standards setting is urgently needed to maintain our standing and credibility. Let us all work together towards establishing ourselves on the world stage, without letting false pride and excessive nationalism hold us back.

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