Professionalism, ethics vital for docs: Gan

Singapore Medical Council reviewing Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines for doctors

Fiona Low

Doctors need to go beyond learning to make medical diagnoses and providing treatments. It is vital that they are also competent in professionalism and ethics, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said yesterday.

He was addressing about 380 new doctors. The occasion was the twice-yearly Physician’s Pledge Affirmation Ceremony, held at the National University of Singapore.

This year also saw the first graduating cohort from the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School.

Noting that the residency programme for doctors here incorporates professionalism as a core competency for training and assessment, he said: “The challenge arises when your personal interests and the patients’ are not aligned.

“When that happens, patients will need to rely on your sense of professionalism — that you’ll do the right thing in their best interest.”

The Singapore Medical Council will be reviewing its Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines for doctors, expected to be ready in the first quarter of next year. The current guidelines were published in 2002.

Mr Gan stressed that while medicine has progressed, the fundamental principle of “patients before self” must still guide practice today.

His comments come after recent news reports of a hand surgeon who doctor a patient’s consent form after the operation.

Dr Looi Kok Poh, who heads a private practice at Gleneagles Medical Centre, had severed a patient’s nerves during surgery. He then performed, in the same operation, a procedure to reattach the nerves.

He later had a nurse edit the patient’s consent form to include the latter procedure without informing the patient.

Dr Looi and Gleneagles Hospital have admitted liability. The damages both will have to pay will be assessed by the court at a later date.

The Physician’s Pledge is a requirement for doctors here before they are granted full registration to practise medicine independently. The words of the pledge are adapted from the Oath of Hippocrates.

As of last year, there were about 9,030 registered medical practitioners in Singapore, some 500 more than the total figure for 2009.

One challenge the health-care community faces is the increasing commercialisation in medicine, Mr Gan said in his speech.

With consumers now more educated and affluent, he noted a surge in advertisements, especially for lifestyle-related medical services.

Between 2009 and last year, there was a 41 per cent increase in the number of cases that were investigated by the Ministry of Health (MOH) relating to advertisements by health-care institutions.

The number rose from 110 cases in 2009 to 155 cases last year.

The Private Hospitals and Medical Clinics Act permits health-care institutions to provide only factual data, like the types of services provided, clinic addresses and charges.

Advertising material that solicits or encourages the use of the services, including phrases such as “discounts” or “preferential rates”, is not allowed. Laudatory phrases such as “state-of-the-art technology” and “Singapore’s No. 1 clinic” are also disallowed.

A total of 124 such cases have been investigated by MOH this year, as of last Friday.

Mr Gan said patients still need a doctor “whom they can trust, to help them make sense” of the information received. He added that the next step for the health-care industry here is to focus on primary care.

The Government will explore the provision of support services such as eye screening and laboratory facilities to general practitioners, to help them better manage chronic diseases such as diabetes, he said.

ST PHOTO: LIM WUI LIANG

New doctors reciting the Physician’s Pledge at yesterday’s ceremony at NUS. Health Minister Gan Kim Yong was the guest of honour at the event.