

Number of doctors here crosses 10,000

More than half of new docs last year were foreigners, largely from Asia

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THE number of doctors here has risen to more than 10,000 for the first time, thanks in large part to a continued influx of foreign doctors.

Foreigners made up more than half of the 836 new doctors here last year, a spokesman for the Singapore Medical Council (SMC) told The Straits Times.

A large number of these doctors are from elsewhere in Asia and most work in public hospitals and polyclinics.

Today, more than one in three doctors in the public sector are foreigners. In the private sector, they account for fewer than one in six.

The total number of doctors here is stated in the SMC's latest

annual report.

With 10,057 doctors on the registry as of last year, Singapore now has one doctor for every 537 people. This is a far better ratio than 2001's one doctor to 700 people.

Despite this, the doctor:population ratio is still behind that of most developed countries.

The United States has one doctor for every 390 people, while Australia has one per 334 people.

The need for doctors will continue to grow given the new hospitals and nursing homes that are set to open in the next few years.

Professor Benjamin Ong, head of the National University Health System, said foreign doctors "bring different perspectives and usually unique talents and competencies to complement what we have here".

But he added that managing doctors with different backgrounds takes special effort.

Though many of the foreign doctors are Asian, the rise in their numbers in recent years has led to some patients complaining of their inability to speak local languages.

To tackle this, many public health-care institutions provide local-language classes so foreign doctors can better understand non-English-speaking patients.

SMC president Tan Ser Kiat, in his foreword to the annual report, noted that more Singaporeans and permanent residents (PRs) were returning to work here as doctors. They accounted for 110 new doctors last year, compared to just 68 in 2010.

In 2010, the Ministry of Health (MOH) introduced a grant for Singaporeans and PRs studying medicine abroad to help offset the cost of their final two years of study. This was to entice them to return to work here.

So far, 185 students in Britain, Ireland and Australia are on the scheme. Among them, 39 have returned and are undergoing their residency or serving as house officers and medical officers, said an MOH spokesman.

Professor Chee Yam Cheng, chief executive of the National Healthcare Group, said it is easier to get Singaporeans studying in Britain and Ireland to return because of the "European Union's preference for their citizens".

The reverse is true of those studying in Australia, who prefer to do their housemanship there as that gives them an option to work there or return to seek employment here.

The decision to return sometimes hinges on whether they get a place in specialist training there, he added.

The two medical schools here - Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS and the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School - produced 275 new doctors last year.

Figures at a glance

TOTAL NUMBER OF DOCTORS

2011	10,057
2010	9,345
2009	8,877
2008	8,406
2007	8,018

SPECIALISTS (at end-2011)

Public sector	2,242	(of whom 711 are foreigners)
Private sector	1,393	(of whom 251 are foreigners)
Total	3,635	

NON-SPECIALISTS (at end-2011)

Public sector	3,913
Private sector	2,509
Total	6,422

SOURCE: SMC ANNUAL REPORT 2011

This is set to increase in the coming years as both have been upping their student intake.

On top of that, the opening of the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine next year will add to the local pipeline of doctors. At a steady state, it should produce 150 new doctors a year.

Singapore is targeting 500 locally trained doctors a year by the latter part of this decade.

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