

Lifelong commitment

THIS TEMPLE BUILDING WAS OFFICIALLY OPENED
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THE X-FACTOR: A good doctor may not always provide the cure but he needs to always provide the care and comfort that is needed.

You need more than good grades to survive medical school and become a good doctor, **HARIATI AZIZAN** reports.

WHEN Raymond Kumar first thought about going to medical school, he knew very little about the profession.

"It's just one of those things that I considered after my SPM. Basically, I was unsure of what to do at the time and I had nothing to lose except my time."

Raymond's medical stint in India lasted less than two years before he opted for a business degree instead.

"I just didn't want to spend the rest of my life meeting sick people for work. It may sound crude but I guess it's not my cup of tea. Also I didn't have an ambition or burning desire to be a doctor in the first place.

"And money? Well, if I was going to do anything for money, it wouldn't be as a doctor. I guess it took some time for me to make this decision but I have no regrets whatsoever," shares the young bank officer.

For second-year student at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Joanne Low, the past year has been a revelation:

"It is a tough course. I joined because I thought that it is interesting and, luckily for me, it has turned out to be so."

Final year UPM student Raden

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Final-year UPM student Raden Nezarul agrees. One needs real passion, he says, to succeed in medicine.

“Grades count, of course, but as you proceed in your course and is exposed to what medicine is all about and the pressures, a strong interest in medicine is the only thing that will motivate you.”

Many students have romantic notions of the medical world, says Prof Dr Zabidi Azhar Mohd Hussin, chairman of the Council of Medical Deans.

“From my experience, in the first month, a number will drop out from medicine. This is because most of the time, students are not really sure what medicine is all about, so they are in for a shock when they discover that it is difficult or time-consuming.

“Reality sinks in, especially when students are introduced to hospital

rounds.”

Every year, large numbers of high-achievers apply to do medicine because of academic interest as well as the lure of the status the profession gives and the promise of a secure career. Entry is extremely competitive, with programmes offered at only seven public universities and five private institutions in Malaysia.

This year was no different, and 128 hopefuls with the maximum cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 4.0 failed to make the cut for public universities. On Wednesday, however, the Cabinet directed that they be absorbed into public or private medical programmes.

However, when asked about their “burning passion” to become doctors, many of these students were at a loss for words.

Said one: “I love medicine but it's difficult for me to explain why.”

What makes a good doctor

And even those who go into medicine knowing what it is about may still be unprepared for the real thing.

“Memorising books and facts is not how you cope in medicine. You need to have more of a streetwise kind of ‘smart’. I learn more from the experience at hospital and working with seniors and friends than slogging over textbooks,” says Joanne.

A former medical student at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), who only wants to be known as Hassanal, discovered this the hard way – finding it difficult to cope, the bright student had to leave the programme midway.

“I didn't know the high price you have to pay to be a doctor. I was attracted by the respect it commands and the money you can earn



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but found the sacrifice too much to handle."

The common belief that a high IQ is the only prerequisite for a medical career is misleading, he adds.

"It's not only intelligence; it's more about endurance and sustaining your interest. If you are motivated by strong goals and dreams, it'll be easier. If you are in it for the wrong reasons, or someone else's dream, it'll be a rough ride for you."

With hindsight, however, his time in medical school has not been a complete waste.

"As a medical student, you learn how to handle people – like listening to patients, for one. This experience is now an asset for me," says Hassanal, currently looking at a career in communications and business.

To do well in medicine, one must also be a consistent learner, points out Prof Victor Lim, dean of International Medical University's (IMU) Faculty of Medicine.

"Medical students are expected

to be able to learn in an independent self-directed manner. A doctor must be knowledgeable and technically competent. He needs to also keep abreast of the latest developments in medicine.

"Curiosity and the desire to seek new knowledge are therefore important traits for a doctor," he stresses.

A good doctor has to play many diverse roles, he adds.

"Health care today is a team effort and a good doctor must be able to work effectively with other members of the health care team for the good of the patient.

"And he needs to be a good manager to utilise resources in the most cost-beneficial manner. He must also be caring and must place the interests of his patient above all else."

Dr Zabidi concurs.

"Students need to have an intrinsic people-centred personality as there is only so much that we can instil in the programme."

The heavy demands, he observes, makes it difficult for medical programmes to nurture "soft skills" in budding doctors, so it is advantageous if students come with such personality traits.

Better selection process

This quality can only be gauged through an interview, says Dr Zabidi, lauding the Government's plans to introduce interviews in the selection process of medical students next year.

"With interviews, a personality assessment can be done before the students are accepted," he explains.

Another good selection method, he says, is aptitude tests.

"Academic excellence is not the only criterion for medicine. Character, motivation, real interest, interpersonal skills and compassion are far more important qualities in a doctor."

Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology registrar Prof Dr R. Rajakrishnan proposes that aspiring students be sent for a weeklong stint at a hospital.

"This will really open their eyes to the reality. It will help them decide if they are suited for the profession or not."

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ession or not.

Prof Lim, however, opines that a common medical college admission test should be considered.

Despite all the difficulties others have faced, top students will continue to pursue the dream of doing medicine.

Fifth-year IMU student Dayang Azzyati Awang Dahlan, however, advises them to first find out more about what is involved.

“Medicine is a glamorous career option that attracts top students. Even I was swayed by that. However, you have to be highly motivated to endure the long years of training and the demands it places on the intellect, emotion and maturity.”

Adds her college mate Tan Moo Ling: “To succeed in medicine requires not only the brain but the heart as well.

“We will be treating people, not examination papers. And in the end, the judge of how good a doctor is will be the person on the receiving end of the syringe.”

ACCORDING to Health Minister Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek, the country needs to train 1,500 doctors a year to reach the target of a doctor-patient ratio of 1:650 by 2020.

The obvious solution is to increase the capacity of existing medical schools or the number of schools.

"This is easier said than done. Medical schools are expensive to establish and to run. Moreover, to maintain standards, we need to have sufficient numbers of well-qualified lecturers, particularly in the clinical phase, which is akin to an apprenticeship," says Prof Victor Lim, dean of International Medical University's Faculty of Medicine.

Council of Medical Deans chairman Dr Zabidi Azhar Mohd Hussin believes that one problem is the lack of synergy between the different ministries dealing with human resources, health and education.

"The establishment of the new

More medical schools?

Higher Education Ministry is good as it can now focus on the problem better but there still needs to be some co-operation with the other ministries."

The situation of medical lecturers, he argues, needs to be improved if specialists are to be attracted into academia.

"We can easily hire foreign academics but for how long? We have our own pool of talented specialists and experts that can be tapped into. The problem is the huge salary gap. For example, a head of department might earn about RM15,000 a month compared to RM40,000 for a specialist at a private hospital.

"But it is not all about money – the bulk of work is also unattractive to many. Academics have to conduct research and present

papers at international conferences on top of teaching duties. When you compare the two, it is no surprise that many have left to join the private sector," he adds.

Citing University Malaya Specialist Centre, the university hospital's private wing, as an example, he proposes a scheme where academics be allowed to work part-time at private clinics and hospitals to halt the brain drain.

Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology registrar Prof Dr R. Rajakrishnan, however, strongly believes that more students should be encouraged to pursue academic careers.

"At the moment, post-graduate courses in anatomy or pathology are not offered in many of our universities."