Towards a healthy progression
THOMAS Edison got it partially right when he said that “the doctor of the future will give no medicine but will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, in diet and in the cause and prevention of disease.” While administering medicine is still a practice in the treatment of patients, health sciences has developed into a multi-disciplinary field that is concerned not only with the treatment of diseases but also the improvement and advancement of all aspects of wellness and health care.

“When we mention the health industry, it encompasses the life sciences, health care and medical diagnostics and is facilitated by research in fields such as biomedical science, biotechnology, medical laboratory science, medicine, nursing, nutrition, pharmacy and public health,” says Dr. Rozita Rosli from the Faculty of Medicine (Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia). The study of health sciences has evolved to include age-old traditional medicine such as Ayurveda and acupuncture of the East, new discoveries of stem cells and genes from hard basic science. Some universities offer courses to incorporate elements of complementary medicine into their curriculum. In our country, the potential of stem cells and genomics as well as development of local herbal products for health being explored.

While the advent of science and technology has revolutionised the practice of medicine, Professor Dr. Promwichit, Ministry of Health Sciences, maintains that the industry is progressing at a fairly rapid pace. The study of Health sciences has taken a back over the centuries and countries. Research pro
and development had been focused on technical disciplines, which is why technological development had flourished whereas health sciences did not," he elaborates.

“But in the late 1990s, there was a heightened ‘realisation’ of the importance of health sciences and healthcare. Then suddenly the demand everywhere for health science personnel increased. This led to a migration of qualified health science personnel to economically advantaged countries in the West. And, that is how the interest in health sciences was resurrected.”

At the local level, Dr Rozita feels that the industry is still lagging behind its Western counterparts. “The health science industry in Malaysia currently is very much dependent on the West. However, the scene is slowly changing,” she maintains.

“I believe the prospect for growth is always there. The motivation for research takes it cue from consumers. If the general public trust and backs local products, progress could proceed faster.”

Nevertheless, job prospects for graduates in this field are very promising. According to a study conducted by MASTERSKILL in 2007, there are plenty of career opportunities for health science professionals in Malaysia and other developed countries.

“Currently, the personnel to patient ratio in Malaysia is high. Ideally, there should be around 800 to 1,000 health science personnel in each discipline,” says Professor Promwichit. “In Malaysia, with its population of 25 million, there is a demand for 31,250 health science personnel in every discipline; double that figure in the case of nurses.”

The country’s growing popularity as a medical tourism destination has also contributed to the demand for graduates in this field. “We believe that medical tourism can play an important role in generating income for the country,” says Professor Salmaan H. Inayat-Hussain, Dean and Professor of Toxicology of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s (UKM) Faculty of Allied Health and Sciences.

“Specialised centres such as allied health hospitals can be developed to cater to medical tourism needs.”

However, Professor Promwichit notes that there is a downside to medical tourism.

“Many countries have initiated medical tourism programmes. Malaysia should not be an exception. However, medical tourism should be encouraged with caution,” he advises.

“Malaysia had once eradicated tuberculosis, malaria and a few more diseases. But currently we are back to square one. In short, the country should not allow free entry for unhealthy tourists. Patient screening should be implemented.”

Meanwhile, Dr Rozita, who believes that biomedicine should join the ranks of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and dietetics as a professional degree, makes the case for more professionals in this field.

“Biomedicine plays a critical role in linking the science of biology and medicine. At the moment, there seems to be a huge wall that separates the two. Both have to learn...”
to make your own decisions, based on your own knowledge and skill, not as a person who is taking instructions from someone else. An example would be nurses who take instructions from doctors. Now nurses are moving away from that paradigm to be professionals in their own right, where they make decisions based on their expertise in their own field.

Professional development means being autonomous in that way.”

Another aspect of their profession graduates should take responsibility for is the moral issues and ethical considerations involved. “These issues are being taught in classes, but their application in the wards is more important than just learning them. Application means you need a clinical supervisor to go with the student and demonstrate how to talk and explain to patients,” explains Associate Professor Rohani.

“But most importantly, the clinical supervisor must also be of a certain calibre to be able to identify the needs of both the patient and the student. This is where awareness of cultural, social and religious needs comes in, especially with the development of medical tourism. This is why we need postgraduate students with more in-depth knowledge in these areas.”

The demand for graduates in the health sciences will continue to rise in tandem with the progression of the industry.

Moving forward, the challenge for institutions of higher learning will be to produce individuals who are not only qualified for positions in the industry; they must also be conscientious and cognizant of their roles as professionals who provide an important service to society."