Doctors going back to school to get MBA

With business edge, they hope to be physician administrators, a group of docs in big demand

AT AGE 33 and after some six years treating patients, Dr Tang Teck Nguang is back in school. But he is not there to pick up a new medical specialisation – he is studying business. Looking to be as adept at spreadsheets and cashflow statements as he is with his stethoscope, Dr Tang is studying for a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree.

His aim: to move into hospital management.

While a doctor getting an MBA was practically unheard of 10 years ago, he is now but one of a growing number attending business school to give themselves an edge.

In the past four years, the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Business School has seen the number of doctors in their various MBA programmes slowly but surely inch up.

From having just one doctor in its cohort of some 150 MBA students in 2005, the number increased to four the following year, and then eight this year. Last year, the school even launched a full-time MBA course with a specialisation in Health Care Management to cater to this group. Students pay $34,000 for the full-time MBA programme.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) similarly reported a growing demand for its non-degree course on hospital management. It attracts medical doctors, consultant surgeons as well as CEOs and professionals holding top management positions in regional hospitals. Each course comprises about 40 to 60 participants from the region.

It is also planning to launch a health-care-specific degree programme in the middle of next year.

Associate Professor Kulwant Singh from the NUS Business School attributes the rise in the number of such students to careers in the health sector becoming exceedingly complex.

On top of medical challenges, he said doctors now had to learn how to “manage multiple interactions with staff, medical and government authorities, financial organisations and employers, and most importantly, deal with patients and their families.”

“The skills required – leadership, general management, human resource management, communications, inter-personal skills, IT, managing operations – are exactly the skills the MBA programme focuses on,” he said.

And doctors with those skills are certainly in demand.

Many of the graduates will eventually join an emerging group of highly sought-after doctors known as physician administrators. These are decision-makers at hospitals and health-care companies who have medical training as well.

Among Singapore’s prominent physician administrators are Dr Lim Suek Wuin, chief executive of the National Healthcare Group, and Associate Professor Ivy Ng, chief executive of KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital.

Part of this demand for doctor-managers stems from the notion that it is easier for a doctor to man-
age doctors.

Said Associate Professor Annie Koh, dean of SMU’s executive education: “Within the medical fraternity, someone parachuted from outside the practice will find it harder to herd the doctors together. A doctor will find it easier to get buy-in for his policies.”

And though every new physician administrator means one less doctor practising medicine, the Singapore Medical Association is not worried about the lure of management cannibalising the already short supply of doctors.

Said the association’s president, Nominated Member of Parliament Tan Sue Wee: “There are still relatively few doctors going into management, and just because you take an MBA, it does not mean you will be a manager. You still need to get a job doing that.”

He added that business fundamentals are also crucial for doctors intending to branch out and open their own clinics.

For the doctors who are now either taking night classes or have quit their jobs to attend business school, the move has much to do with their influence in the workplace.

Said Dr Tang: “You can create bigger changes in management. You are involved in the widespread policy changes that will affect a lot of people.”

Dr Shivani Kapur, 28, agreed: “If you are at a higher level... you can do more for the people who need you.” She is currently enrolled in NUS’ MBA programme with a specialisation in Health Care Management. She had been working as a hospital doctor and hopes to become a hospital manager after graduation.

For Dr Snow Yong Tong, 30, a doctor with the National Healthcare Group who is currently enrolled in NUS’ part-time executive MBA programme, there are benefits for the doctor even if he does not finally enter administration. He said: “Doctors can no longer work in isolation. I think it’s good to be more versatile and understand the business side of things as well as how the global economy will impact the health sector.”