SINGAPORE: Singapore is stepping up its training of doctors, expanding its list of recognised top foreign medical schools, and easing the registration criteria to attract more foreign clinicians with good qualifications and experience - all these to increase its pool of doctors here.

Every year, about 200 doctors graduate from the local university, and Singapore recruits a further 130 foreign doctors annually.

Still, this number is not enough, says Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan, especially as the Ministry plans to provide better care for patients and promote an environment of teaching and learning among doctors.

Speaking at the Lee Kong Chian Ministerial Forum at the Singapore Management University, he said the number of local graduates will be increased by another 50 yearly, and the list of recognised foreign medical schools expanded.

From India alone, three more top medical schools will be added to the current two, which are the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences and the Christian Medical College.

Since 2003, the Ministry has increased the number of recognised foreign medical schools here six-fold to 120.

To attract more clinicians with good qualifications and experience, the registration criteria has been eased.

Foreign-trained specialists now need only to complete two years of supervision, compared to three previously, while for foreign-trained non-specialists, the duration has been halved - from six years to three.

Doctors with at least 5 years of experience after acquiring their speciality or Family Medicine qualification will be allowed to practice in a private setting, right from the start.

Doctors with insufficient clinical experience will need to be supervised for at least a year in an approved institution.

Besides doctors, the Health Ministry will also increase the number of nurses and allied health professionals.

One way, says Mr Khaw, is to retain good foreign nurses by offering them citizenship or PR status, but he added that more will also be done to keep local talents here.

"I think we have done reasonably well and we should continue to make their career more meaningful which we will mean that a lot of times, we will make it challenging so it's not just assistant to doctors but as we push local training degree, and allow them job enlargement to do something else. I think all those help and of course salary adjustments make a difference too. We also cannot take our Singaporeans for granted. I hear there's a "mini Tan Tock Seng" of physiotherapists in London. We will do more to expand the allied health profession," said Mr Khaw.

Also in the pipeline - at least one or two more private hospitals to cope with the 20 percent annual growth in foreign patients.

The Ministry is working with the URA to release details over the next few months.

Four plots of land have been earmarked for the private hospitals - three of which are near existing public hospitals and another in the north to cater to patients from Malaysia.

The Ministry will also look at new opportunities presented by technological advancements to enhance efficiency and lower costs such as moving to the next stage of tele-radiology, by sending CT scans, MRIs and ultrasounds for reporting in India. This is expected to further reduce costs and relieve over-stretched radiologists to focus on higher value-added work. - CNA /dt