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Changes to post-grad medical studies

Students can apply to train in one of seven specialities instead of a year of housemanship

■ BY JUDITH TAN

STARTING in May next year, graduating students from the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine can opt not to do a year of broad-based hospital training as housemen.

Instead, they can apply to start training in one of seven specialities – internal medicine, paediatrics, general surgery, preventive medicine, psychiatry, emergency medicine and pathology – at a medical institution, said Professor K.

Satku, the Ministry of Health's (MOH) director of medical services yesterday.

"There will be 40 places available next year so the doctors would have to compete for them," said Prof Satku at an MOH press conference.

The new system marries the current long-drawn British-style training programme with a more structured and faster-track residency programme similar to those in the United States.

Currently, students have to do five years of medical school and one year of housemanship before starting specialist training.

"There would still be broad-based training during the first year of residency as a number of specialities, like internal medicine, require this," Prof Satku said.

The changes would also mean a structured and more defined training programme for each speciality, with senior

specialists appointed to oversee the training.

"These senior doctors are given protected time – between 30 and 50 per cent – to teach the trainees. This means that the specialist could balance his time between teaching and his clinical responsibilities," Prof Satku said.

"With 250 graduands from the medical school and more returning from overseas, a structured system is needed to properly train them."

NUS takes in 250 students each year, and will expand this number to 300 by 2011. The Straits Times understands that Professor Colin Song, a plastic surgeon, will oversee the training of specialists for SingHealth from next year.

There will be caps placed on the number of training places available for each speciality, said Prof Satku.

The Singapore Medical Association has expressed its concern about fast-track training to the MOH director.

Its president, Dr Chong Yeh Woel, wrote to say that while the association supported a more structured and supervised training system for speciality trainees, there were fears that doctors who delay making a decision, such as those who opt for housemanship first, would be disadvantaged by limited training places.

Responding, Prof Satku said yesterday that there would be fair competition for places among both housemen and new graduates. He said that there is a "consistent trend towards more structured and formative training" in Australia, Europe and the US.

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