

# Clinical doctors set to play key role in coming years

The push to strengthen Singapore's emphasis on public health will see the role of clinicians shift in the coming years, including taking on the crucial task of conveying and explaining public health messaging, the deans of two of Singapore's prominent medical schools told *The Straits Times*.

Doctors will increasingly also provide preventive care, they added.

Last week, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Singapore's medical system needs to shift its centre of gravity to focus on health rather than treating illnesses, so as to address the pressing needs of an ageing population and the attendant burden of chronic diseases.

Such a shift will soon be under way under the Ministry of Health's Healthier SG plan focused on primary care, but implementing it will require "a mindset shift and a fundamental reorientation of how the whole system works", said PM Lee.

Professor Joseph Sung, dean of Nanyang Technological University's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKC Medicine), said primary care doctors can become the vanguard in the quest to keep public healthcare expenditure from rising too quickly.

Giving an example of encouraging patients to go for cancer screening, Prof Sung said: "This doctor will see a patient with a headache, and say that since your family has two members with colorectal cancer, and you are above a certain age and overweight, all these factors come together to make you a high-risk person, and I suggest you go for cancer screening."

"This is a dimension of population health, where primary care can function and prevent the disease from developing into a late stage."

Ensuring this "first goalkeeping" is done right can eliminate a lot of burden on the hospitals, he said.

Professor Thomas Coffman, dean of Duke-NUS Medical School, said that besides linking

patients up with relevant public health programmes and resources, he envisions clinicians as the key "middleman" between patients and scientists who are doing public health research.

"Clinicians come with this specific understanding of disease and of patients and their behaviours, (so) they're really poised to be a central contributor to public health," he said.

But for such a scenario to occur, clinicians have to be trained to do research and understand research papers, so that they are able to speak to scientists and help them make their discoveries relevant to public health.

Both deans said that when training their students to be clinicians, their schools' curricula emphasise the need to be aware of the larger context in which they are practising medicine, and consider diseases not just from the micro, individual level, but also from the macro, public health angle.

Their schools have also been working to support the larger public health system.

Among other things, LKC-Medicine has been running cohort studies which provide data to assist with population and public health, while Duke-NUS has been working with the Ministry of Health to develop population health policies.

Looking to the future, both deans said the role of clinicians must necessarily evolve alongside the national healthcare strategy.

Prof Coffman said: "While providing therapeutic care to patients will remain the major responsibility of clinicians, understanding and incorporating the contemporary principles of public health and preventive care will take on increasing importance."

Prof Sung said: "Conveying accurate information about vaccines, promoting cancer screening and educating patients to use wearable devices for health monitoring are just a few examples of what doctors should do in the area of population health."

**Timothy Goh**



## EVOLVING ROLE

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**PROFESSOR JOSEPH SUNG**, dean of Nanyang Technological University's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine.



## SHIFT TO MACRO LEVEL

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