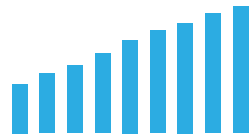


By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

# 159 and Growing...



Singapore recognises 159 “registrable basic medical degrees” awarded by foreign medical schools. However, there seems to be no mention anywhere on the websites of the Ministry of Health (MOH) or Singapore Medical Council (SMC) of the basis for the selection of these 159 schools.

To be fair to the Singapore Medical Council, there does not appear to be any “official” national or international ranking of medical schools to rely on. The United States has a plethora of rankings, the most famous of which is probably the *US News* ratings, as does India (See for example the ranking by *India Today*, the leading weekly magazine in India), but all of these rankings utilise different criteria and none are sanctioned by the respective national medical bodies. National medical councils seem content with accrediting rather than ranking medical schools in their own countries.

**The current practical reality.** According to the Institute for International Medical Education, India has 202 medical schools; France has 47 while China has 150 Western type medical schools. The SMC however recognises only nine Indian, two French and eight Chinese ones. The limitations of manpower will clearly not permit even regular site visits of the existing 159 schools, let alone all the medical schools in countries of interest to us. Hence, the SMC will need to rely on third party assessments, however biased or flawed they might be, and dry reviews of syllabi and pedagogy methods. It must necessarily also be reactive and the withdrawal of recognition of Kasturba Medical College (KMC) of India following the Indian Medical Council’s recommendation to the federal government to stop recognising the KMC degree is

a case in point. Interestingly, the same *India Today* rankings that the MOH and SMC hinted that they relied on in the initial decision to recognise KMC (“Safeguards to ensure high standards from foreign doctors”, *Today*, 5 October 2007) continue to place KMC highly (Number five and ahead of five other Indian medical schools which SMC recognises) in its 2007 rankings!

**Why this is inadequate.** This approach would suffice if Singapore is pursuing only a ‘numbers game’. However, Minister Khaw has said previously we should “open up for the best to work here” and a somewhat arbitrary list of medical schools, while probably the most expedient way to assure a certain minimum standard, will also severely limit Singapore’s opportunities of attracting potential Nobel laureates from one of the 193 Indian, 45 French and 142 Chinese medical schools whose degrees we do not recognise for registration purposes.

**Is there a better way?** The Americans consider heavily scores in the USMLE (United States Medical Licensing Examination) which any foreign trained doctor can attempt. Should Singapore consider likewise? We had 643 foreign trained doctors registered in Singapore in 2006 and the logistics of a national licensing examination would be formidable. But this must be balanced against the current reality of what could reasonably be deemed undue reliance on foreign medical councils and media groups to ensure minimum standards and rank medical schools respectively. If Singapore is determined to cast her net wide for the best medical talents in the world while maintaining the rigour and quality of our healthcare system, an entrance examination or equivalent is an option we may have to contemplate. ■



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