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Medical breakthrough

Li Huang

WITH THE increasing emphasis on health care in the country, a stronger demand for doctors cannot be denied. Presently, Malaysia is lagging behind developed countries as evidenced in statistics that show that there is only one doctor to every 2,000 people in the country.

To meet the demand, a consortium of local companies has teamed up with the UK-based University of Sheffield to offer a unique concept in medical education, the first of its kind.

The concept is described as an innovative reverse twinning programme. Students admitted to this programme will spend the first two years of the course in the Medical School at the University of Sheffield. They will then return to Malaysia to attend the Asean Sheffield Medical College in Ipoh, Perak, to complete their course. Successful students will be awarded a University of Sheffield MB ChB Degree (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery) which is fully recognised by the Malaysian Medical Council. The Asean Sheffield Medical College - a first in the Asean region - will be set up and operated by Suci Teguh Sdn Bhd, which is 80 per cent owned by Suci Teguh Holdings Sdn Bhd and 20 per cent by the University of Sheffield. The latter is one of the largest universities in the UK with a student population of over 20,000. The University of Sheffield is also one of the top five UK universities for research.

Suci Teguh Holdings is owned by Yayasan Perak (14 per cent), VXL Holdings Sdn Bhd (32 per cent), Gopeng Bhd (27 per cent) and Paramount Corporation Bhd (27 per cent). Yayasan Perak is the state foundation principally involved in the promotion and enhancement of education, sports, culture, arts and community in Perak.

Gopeng Bhd is a public listed company and is involved in a wide range of activities including construction, infrastructure works, manufacture and distribution of cement, property development, quarrying and plantations. Paramount Corporation Bhd is in property development and investment, insurance, manufacturing and education while VXL Holdings is an investment company with diversified interests in healthcare, property development and information technology.

In an interview with Malaysian Business, VXL Group president Lim Chee Wah says the idea of this reverse twinning programme was mooted in January 1992. Lim pursued the idea further and was able to rope in three other local partners. He says the setting up of Asean Sheffield Medical College is in line with the Perak Foundation's objectives. The Paramount group's presence will provide Suci Teguh with the experience and expertise it has culled over the years from running Kolej Damansara Utama, an established private college.

Lim says the University of Sheffield was chosen because of its fast response and commitment as reflected by its 20 per cent stake in the venture. Furthermore, the University of Sheffield will also play the pivotal role in ensuring that the international standards in the college are maintained.

The establishment of the Asean Sheffield Medical College, Lim says, is also in line with the government's forward-looking objectives to develop Malaysia as a centre of learning and education excellence. It also hopes to help Malaysia meet its targeted ratio of one doctor to 1,500 people by the year 2000 in a bid to provide a higher level of health care to the population.

The college's ground breaking ceremony was performed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on July 4, 1996.

Yayasan Perak's general manager Tuan Haji Mohd Annuar Zaini says the plan for the construction of the college has been submitted to Ipoh City Hall and work on the project will start in February 1997 and is scheduled for completion by mid-1998. Lim adds that the development involves an investment of some RM40 million.

He says the college is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities in research, clinical laboratories, lecture theatres, seminar rooms and a library.

Professor Dr Nigel D S Bax of the University of Sheffield says that Sheffield University has taken in its first batch of 30 students, 21 are from Malaysia and the rest from seven other countries. This batch will be in Malaysia in 1998 to pursue the remaining three clinical years of the course. The training in Malaysia will help the students learn the way medicine is practised in their own country, which will be more relevant to their needs.

The Asean Sheffield Medical College is capable of taking up to 120 medical students each year and this target will be met in the September 1997 intake in the UK. The pioneer batch was kept small to ensure manageability.

The Asean Sheffield Medical College, Bax says, will also feature some leading edge academic facilities including a medical museum and information technology systems to facilitate communication between the college in Malaysia and the UK.

The college will be situated next to its teaching hospital - Hospital Ipoh. The latter serves as the main public medical centre for the two million people in Perak, in particular, the 750,000 population in the Kinta Valley. In fact, Hospital Ipoh is regarded as the leading hospital in Perak with 36 wards and 1,000 beds. It also serves as the referral centre for the 12 district hospitals within Perak. With a staff strength of over 2,000, it treats some 700,000 out-patients and 60,000 in-patients annually.

The presence of medical academics from the Asean Sheffield Medical College will enhance the exchange of medical knowledge and contribute to improved healthcare services and expertise in Perak.

Lim declines to comment on when the Asean Medical College will turn around, saying only that the shareholders intend to plow in their profits into other courses for community services such as dentistry.

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