

Headline	Hey doc, how good is your English?		
Date	2008-10-21		
Media Title	The Straits Times (Home) (Mon-Wed)	Section	Home
Page No	B05	Size	8x40
Description	Foreign trainer doctor will have to meet more stringent English language requirement before they can practise.		

Hey doc, how good is your English?

Citing patient safety, SMC raises language proficiency bar for foreign-trained doctors

By JESSICA JAGANATHAN

FOREIGN-TRAINED doctors will have to meet more stringent English language requirements before they can practise here.

The Singapore Medical Council (SMC) has said that it wants foreign-trained doctors to be able to do equally well in understanding, speaking, reading and writing in the language.

They will be given a score on each of these skills on a nine-point-scale, and must do equally well in all four, scoring seven. Nine is the top score. This differs from the present method, which requires them to get an overall score of seven.

The change, announced on the SMC's website, applies to the scoring system for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Other tests recognised by SMC are the Test Of English as a Foreign Language and Occupational English Test.

The scoring of the IELTS, administered by the British Council, has led to some confusion about what level of proficiency is regarded as adequate.

Dr Charles Vu, who sits on the medical manpower development panel of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTS), said: "You can potentially have someone from Myanmar or Vietnam who can read and write but not be able to speak English well.

"Listening to and speaking English should be just as, if not more important, when communicating with patients."

The issue of foreign-trained doctors' ability to communicate with patients has surfaced time and again, but is more significant now, with the Health Ministry's expanding the list of recognised foreign medical schools from 20 in 2003 to nearly 160 last year.

Among the recognised universities are some which do not use English as a medium of instruction, such as Nagoya University's faculty of medicine and The West China College of Medicine in Sichuan University.

Dr Vu said that with the expanded list of recognised schools, more stringent English requirements are more important now than ever before.

Said an SMC spokesman: "Casenotes, requests and communication between health-care professionals are all in English, so for patient safety, whatever is communicated in the management must be understood."

There were 524 foreign-trained graduate doctors registered here in 2006, up from 460 the year before. About 8 per cent, from countries such as Japan, South Korea, Belgium, Germany and China, need to take language tests.

Various hospitals here have programmes to immerse foreign-trained doctors in local culture. Alexandra Hospital organises events for staff to showcase their culture, and Tan Tock Seng Hospital holds Chinese and Malay language classes for its foreign doctors.

But Associate Professor Tay Eng Hseon, who chairs the medical board at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH), cautioned against too stringent requirements for the language.

He said KKH lost an excellent anaesthesiologist who just could not make the cut in the language department. Despite repeated attempts, the doctor only managed a score of six. The hospital appealed to retain the doctor but was unsuccessful, said Prof Tay.