New training focus: Care outside of hospitals

In a move to raise preventive care standards and keep more people out of hospitals, new degree courses in physiotherapy, occupational therapy, diagnostic radiography and radiation therapy will be offered from 2016.

Explaining the need for this, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said physiotherapists and occupational therapists will increasingly be needed to provide rehabilitation and preventive care outside of hospitals, both in the community and in patients’ homes.

Even hospital-based therapists will need to work outside, he said, especially to help the frail and less mobile who face difficulties in travelling to hospitals.

Diagnostic radiographers and radiation therapists are also required to boost early diagnosis of ailments such as cancer so patients can get early treatment and suffer less.

The public sector has about 2,100 such therapists.

Speaking at a ceremony yesterday to mark the start of above-ground building of two Sengkang hospitals, which will provide 1,400 beds when they open in 2018, Mr Gan said: “We need to invest in a lot more of preventive health to minimise the stress on hospital services.”

While promising to add 11,000 more beds to the current 23,000 by 2020, he added: “Building more hospitals and adding more beds is not a sustainable long-term approach.

“We can no longer rely on a hospital-centric system as patients’ needs become more complex, which also means they require longer-term care outside the hospital setting.”

This is why the Health Ministry (MOH) has been developing regional health systems in which a general hospital works closely with its cluster of community hospitals, nursing homes, home- and day-care providers and private clinics in the vicinity.

“Patients will be better enabled to manage their own health and chronic conditions so that they will remain well and avoid going to hospital,” said the minister.

The four new degree programmes will be taught at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). The school will take in 235 students in 2016, with half the places for occupational therapists and 40 per cent for physiotherapists.

The courses will give young people here “a more diverse range of careers to fulfil their aspirations”, said Mr Gan.

Current, such training is provided only at Nanyang Polytechnic, which has been teaching these subjects as diploma courses since 1992. It will take in its last batch of students next year.

Sengkang Health’s core team, meanwhile, is already working with agencies in the vicinity to see how it can promote health and prevent the need for hospitalisation. It held a focus group discussion yesterday to generate ideas on how to promote healthy living.

Sengkang Health’s acting head, Professor Christopher Cheng, also promised that the medical teams that will run the new hospitals will include “renowned” doctors and highly experienced nurses and allied health-care professionals, such as radiation therapists.

They will come from other SingHealth hospitals such as Singapore General.

Taking a jibe at Jurong’s upcoming Ng Teng Fong Hospital, which was supposed to open this year but was delayed by six months, Prof Cheng also assured that his hospitals will be “on time and on budget”.