

Health care ‘needs booster shot of funds’

Govt must also invest in training and relook subsidies: MPs, experts

BY MELISSA PANG & POON CHIAN HUI

MORE money needs to be injected into health care to meet a demand for services from a growing and greying population, said MPs and experts.

The Government also needs to invest in training and relook subsidies, they added, after Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said health-care spending is likely to exceed the current 4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).

In an interview with Chinese newspaper Lianhe Zaobao published yesterday, he cited the demand for quality health-care services and an ageing population.

How much and how fast health-care spending will rise, he added, will depend to a large extent on what is done with “innovation and managing costs”, efforts to promote health and whether the Government succeeds in instilling personal responsibility for health.

Mr Gan said money must be spent in a “targeted way” so that it goes to where and who needs it the most.

The national health-care expenditure has increased by 54 per cent over the last few years – from \$7.9 billion in 2006 to \$12.2 billion last year.

Dr Lam Pin Min, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health, suggested that a spending of 6 per cent to 8 per cent of GDP would be more realistic in the long run.

He cited short- and long-term challenges such as the current public hospital bed crunch, long waiting times to see specialists, a rapidly ageing Singapore, health-care affordability and manpower requirements to meet future needs.

Last year, Singapore’s population stood at 5.076 million. There were 3.23 million citizens, 541,000 permanent residents (PRs) and 1.305 million non-residents – foreigners living, studying and working here.

In 1990, the population was 3.04 million, comprising 2.62 million citizens, 112,000 PRs and 311,000 non-residents.

In all public hospitals, the occupancy rate has ranged from 75 per cent to 85 per cent since August last year, said the Ministry of Health in a recent report.

Two hospitals in Jurong and Sengkang are scheduled to open in 2014 and 2020 respectively. They will have about 1,300 beds in all.

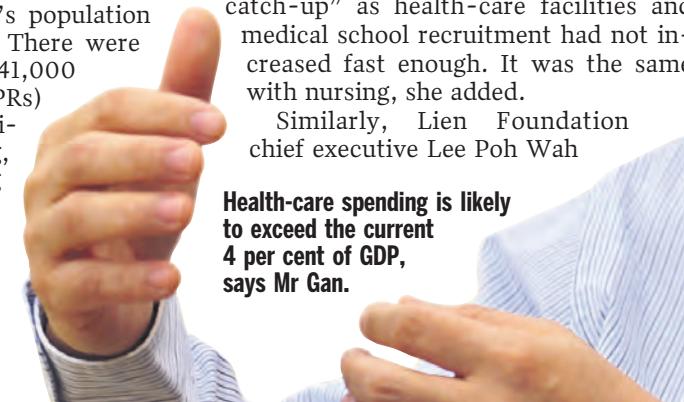
Last month, Mr Gan announced that he may push forward the opening date for the Sengkang hospital.

Associate Professor Fatimah Lateef, an MP for Marine Parade GRC and a senior consultant at the Singapore General Hospital, noted that the doctor-to-patient ratio needed improving.

She said the country was now “playing catch-up” as health-care facilities and medical school recruitment had not increased fast enough. It was the same with nursing, she added.

Similarly, Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah

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pointed out that bumping up the number of trained professionals was important.

“You can’t flush in the money and resources when, on the ground, there isn’t enough manpower to absorb it,” he said.

One other area the Government should channel more funds to is technology, said Nee Soon GRC MP Lim Wee Kiak, an eye specialist in private practice.

“Having a seamless system that allows a doctor to access a patient’s primary records is very important. We are a small and wired country, and have this advantage.

“We should find a way to integrate patient health records from public and private hospitals and clinics,” he said.

Dr Lam said government subsidies needed to be increased in tandem with inflation.

“Otherwise, the out-of-pocket expenditure of Singaporeans will increase. This may have added to the perception that health care in Singapore has become less affordable.”

Mr Lee pointed out that a recent study on end-of-life care commissioned by Lien Foundation found that it was cheaper for people to die in hospital – because of subsidised care – than in their homes.

The study involved interviews with 78 doctors on their views of palliative care.

“Maybe more funds need to be released for community and home care,” he added.

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