More cadavers needed, shortage may affect medical training

Only 24 donated bodies last year; Shortage may affect training of future doctors

By Poon Chian Hui

They gathered to read poems, share their reflections and put on musical performances to remember those who died.

But this was no ordinary eulogy. The participants were medical students and staff of the National University of Singapore (NUS), who were giving thanks to the dead whose bodies they have used for medical training.

This annual event for the 'silent mentors' was open to media coverage for the first time on Tuesday.

Its purpose was to de-mystify how the bodies are treated, and to raise awareness about a shrinking supply of cadavers that may affect the training of future doctors here.

Figures obtained from the Health Ministry show that last year, it received only 24 donated bodies, down from a five-year peak of 38 in 2008. In 2010, there were only 20 bodies.

The shortage is already affecting schools that use them.

The number of cadavers received by the NUS fell to six last year, down from 32 in 2000.

Medical educators say the supply crunch will become more acute as the number of medical students here - along with demand for these bodies - increases.

The number of first-year NUS medical students - the people who use these cadavers - increased from 218 in 2000 to 282 this year.

And when the new medical school at Nanyang Technological University opens next year, this demand will probably become more urgent.

NUS said its medical school now has 12 bodies to work on, and that this number was 'just right'.

'Any fewer, and it wouldn't be optimal,' said Professor Bay Boon Huat, NUS anatomy department head at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

Cadavers are obtained in three ways: They are unclaimed bodies, donations made by next of kin, or come from those who have personally pledged to give their bodies for scientific research.

At NUS, most of its cadavers now are unclaimed bodies supplied by the Health Sciences Authority. The medical school said it would look into getting more bodies from another source.

One way would be to work with the National Organ Transplant Unit under the Health Ministry to see how more pledged bodies may be channelled for medical training, said Prof Bay.

Already, NUS has done away with the dissection of cadavers by first-year students since 2003, partly due to shortage supply. The bodies are dissected by staff to prevent wastage.

Medical and life sciences students interviewed in a recent NUS survey said they preferred cadaveric training to computer programmes introduced by the school that simulate the experience of exploring the inside of a human body.

First-year NUS medical student Daniel Lim, 20, said: 'What all these simulation and technological toys lack is
the sense of touch, the sense of identity of the person.'

In Singapore, only slightly more than 300 people have pledged to give their bodies since 1970.

This figure pales in comparison to other Asian countries, said Associate Professor Ng Yee Kong of the NUS anatomy department.

In Japan, for example, more than 200,000 people have pledged to give their bodies for research, said Prof Ng.

That is why the school hopes to take things one step further - to encourage people to donate their bodies to science. One possibility would be to run awareness drives, such as the one held on Tuesday.

Prof Ng said people may not want to donate their bodies for fear that they may be mishandled.

The solution, he said, was to 'inculcate the values of respect, responsibility and gratitude - at the medical school level'.

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