

New MOH agency aims to tackle long-term healthcare issues

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SINGAPORE – To tackle longer-term issues facing the healthcare system, the Ministry of Health announced a new Office for Healthcare Transformation yesterday to be headed by the outgoing president of the National University of Singapore, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan.

The new office will be set up from January next year. Its mandate: Identifying and pursuing “game-changing, future oriented concepts and care models” with other players in the system.

Prof Tan — the MOH’s former Director of Medical Services (DMS) who led the public health response during the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome epidemic — will concurrently be the MOH’s chief health scientist. He will guide research and development in health and biomedical sciences.

In a statement by the ministry yesterday, Prof Tan, 58, said his office will focus on “a number of critical areas”.

It will look at ways to help Singaporeans adopt “health-promoting behaviours” to delay or prevent the onset of chronic conditions.

It wants to work with primary care providers to make home-based care more viable and effective, and the “preferred choice” for patients with chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension and high blood cholesterol.

It will work with hospitals to provide more holistic care to patients with multiple medical conditions.

“(Currently), when such patients are hospitalised for treatment, they are often looked after by several specialists, which could result in fragmentation of care,” he said.

Healthcare practitioners and analysts envision the new office as a “central body” coordinating programmes

under agencies such as the Health Promotion Board, Agency for Integrated Care and Agency for Care Effectiveness. Some, such as Dr Goh Kian Peng, said the impetus for the move should be made known.

“It is essential to know where the (new office) sits in the organisational chart of the MOH,” said Dr Goh, a senior consultant at the Saint-Julien Clinic for Diabetes and Endocrinology at Mount Alvernia Hospital.

General practitioner Leong Choon Kit sees Prof Tan’s office as “the brain, while the other agencies are the executors of programmes”.

“They should take directions or consult his office in all their plans before rolling out,” added Dr Leong, who sits on the Singapore Medical Council.

Doctors said Prof Tan’s office should minimise resource duplication. For instance, Dr Leong and Member of Parliament (MP) Dr Chia Shi-Lu said health screenings — a key prong of the Government’s push for preventive care and early intervention — should be more coordinated and streamlined.

The new office will have its work cut out, given the complexity of tackling chronic diseases and the incentives that need to go with changing care models, said observers.

“Patients will prefer to opt for institution-based services, as long as more claims and subsidies are allocated to them. Our funding has to support the

behaviours we want to encourage,” said Dr Jeremy Lim, who heads the Health and Life Sciences Practice in Asia at global consultancy Oliver Wyman.

A key barrier in the expansion of home-based care is how government subsidies are structured, said MP Tin Pei Ling.

Treating chronic diseases is labour-intensive and time-consuming, said Dr Goh.

He added that it is not going to be cheap as doctors need time to understand the patients’ social environment in order to dispense useful advice on diet, exercise and medication.

Asked about Prof Tan’s new role in relation to that of the ministry’s permanent secretary and the DMS, Dr Lim said “these are uncharted waters and the dynamic will have to evolve”.

Permanent Secretary, Mr Chan Heng Kee, and the DMS, Assoc Prof Benjamin Ong, will probably focus more on “today’s issues”, he said.

The MOH said Prof Tan, together with MOH’s National Medical Research Council, would guide efforts to enhance Singapore’s thought leadership through the discovery of new knowledge on health and disease, novel therapies and more effective diagnostics.

He will work closely with the healthcare clusters and agencies such as the National Research Foundation and Economic Development Board.

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