Standardise evaluation of medical graduates

THERE have been nearly 1,000 medical graduates in Malaysia from unrecognised universities since 1992. Many come from poor families and can only dream of enrolling in a recognised university because the agent and tuition fees are extremely high. Although some of these universities are actually affordable, middle men (agents) make them unaffordable because of commission charges which are up to 10 times more than what they should be.

Agents also make it compulsory for students to pay their annual tuition fee to them and not directly to the university. Even after graduating, students are unaware of how much the actual tuition fee was and how much they paid the agent each year.

ISSUES WITH MQE
To make up for a lack of doctors, foreign doctors from Arab countries, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma etc. are warmly welcomed in Malaysia to work on a contractual basis. Although some of them are products of unrecognised universities and lack communication skills in Malay, they are still prioritised over Malaysian graduates from unrecognised universities (MGUs).

Since the degrees of MGUs are not recognised by the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC), all of them have to sit for the Medical Qualifying Exam (MQE), which is supposedly to be fully conducted by the MMC and not by local universities. Yet, MGUs are told to sit for the exam at Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or Universiti Sains Malaysia as the final year exam of those universities. The MMC charges a fee of RM400 for registration, and the local universities charge between RM1,900 and RM3,500 for a six-week course, plus RM750 for exam fees. Moreover, MGUs are not provided with hostels for the duration.

The six-week course held by the universities is a waste of time and money because tutors assigned to guide the graduates are all busy with their own work. However, it is not the tutors who should be blamed, but the MMC for not conducting the MQE independently. The exam which was in previous years conducted twice a year in March and October, is now conducted only once in October. When asked why, the MMC’s answer is that “everything depends on the university”. Yet on the MMC website, it is still stated that the MQE is held twice a year. In the UK, for example, the General Medical Council (GMC) conducts independently, Part 1 (Theory) of the exam four times a year, and Part 2 (Clinical) 11 times.

On average, the MQE pass rate is 5-10% a year, with a minimum pass mark of 50%. Local students have a maximum 20% head start even before they step into the examination hall. (20% = class attendance/course work etc). MGUs who pass the MQE should be given a certificate or medical degree from the respective local university at which he/she took the exam. If they can pass this final year local university exam, then they are obviously qualified to receive a medical degree from that university.

The MQE is not a standard medical licensing exam like that of the United States Medical Licensing Exam or the UK’s Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board Exam which are single standard systems for all medical graduates, no matter where you receive a degree from or what nationality you hold. In Malaysia, however, the recognition of foreign universities is unprofessionally conducted.

RECOGNITION
A few years ago, the MMC recognised five medical universities in Poland and the Czech Republic which were said by the council to be affordable, but these are not even close to affordable, the tuition fees for six years of study ranging from 350,000 to half a million ringgit. The MMC should recognise more affordable universities which are within the reach of poor/middle-class Malaysians. Why waste government money sending scholarship students to expensive universities such as these? For the same sum spent on one student, the government can send 2-3 students to study in Bangladesh or Indonesia. The government, too, would save millions of ringgit.

Two universities in the Czech Republic were granted recognition by the MMC in 2006/2007. The recognition, however, was backdated to Oct 25, 2004. Why? Were there Malaysian students studying at the institutions even before they were recognised?

Many universities recognised by the MMC are not even the top three ranking universities of that particular country, and yet they are recognised, while a top class institution isn’t. A good example is the Saint Petersburg State Medical University, one of the leading universities in Russia and among the top 10 in the world. It is also recognised by the UK’s GMC, while not by the MMC.

In Iraq, four medical schools living on past glory are still recognised by the MMC. The council should have a clear picture of the standards and quality of medical universities which are to be recognised, as rankings are provided by the Health Ministry, the council and the World Health Organisation. The ministry and the council should also pay each of these universities a visit every year to ensure that the quality of medical education, clinical hospitals and teaching staff are top class. How many times has the MMC visited or revisited recognised medical universities abroad?

People's Voice
Subang Jaya
► The second part of this letter will appear tomorrow.