

Hello, the nurse is in

Advanced practice nurses take on some tasks done by doctors

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SHE walks around with a stethoscope draped around her neck and examines patients in her office.

But Madam Jamie Lim Chuen, 41, is not a doctor. She is a nurse.

An advanced practice nurse, to be precise.

This means Madam Lim is qualified to carry out some tasks done by doctors – for instance, diagnosing patients, interpreting test results and conducting physical examinations.

Last month, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan announced in Parliament that the ministry plans to train 200 new advanced practice nurses over the next five years.

Getting specially trained nurses to take on more responsibilities frees up doctors to focus more on complex cases.

Qualified advanced practice nurses like Madam Lim have been around since 2006. The Ministry of Health (MOH) website says there were 17 such nurses in 2008.

They hold at least a master's degree in nursing and have more than a decade of practical experience.

Madam Lim has 22 years of experience in nursing. At the Heart Failure Clinic in Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TISH), she checks patients' heart and lungs and reviews their medication and blood test results.

Daily rounds

Dressed in a bright blue nurse's uniform, she also makes daily rounds visiting about 10 cardiology patients in the wards, reviewing each case and jotting down case notes.

But there are limitations on what advanced practice nurses can do.

For instance, Madam Lim cannot prescribe medication without a doctor's approval.

At the clinic, she and a doctor sit in separate but adjoining rooms to see patients.

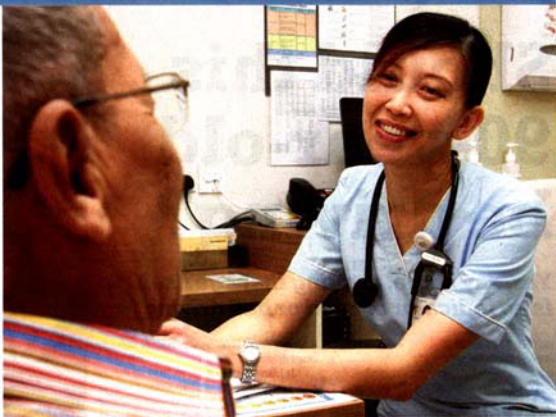
Whenever she needs to get a prescription approved for a patient or check with the doctor on a more complex case, she simply walks over to consult the doctor in the office next door.

While the learning curve was initially steep, Madam Lim is now so used to presenting patient cases and explaining her prescribed plan of action to doctors that it takes just under a minute to consult the doctor.

She is married to a 39-year-old doctor, who also works at TISH but in a different department.

Madam Lim welcomed MOH's move to have more specialised nurses.

"It's definitely a good thing because we like the bridge between the different medical profession-



PERSONABLE: Advanced practice nurse Jamie Lim Chuen seeing retiree Mr Steven Lee.

TNP PICTURE: LUKE YAN

als – doctors, junior nurses and case managers – as we understand the jargon," she said.

Plus, she noted, it gives senior nurses like her another career option apart from becoming an administrator or manager.

But one obstacle she faces as an advanced practice nurse is initial resistance from some patients.

Seeing a nurse instead of a doctor at the clinic sometimes throws her patients off, Madam Lim said.

Take retired Steven Lee Hak Long, 76.

He first met Madam Lim at the clinic last year. Mr Lee, who had a heart attack in 2008, has been going to the clinic for a check-up every six months.

He said: "I came into the clinic expecting to see a doctor, so I was a little surprised when I saw her nurse instead."

But any reservations he had soon disappeared with Madam Lim's friendly demeanor, he said.

He said: "She's very personable so that helps to make patients like me more comfortable."

It's also cheaper for patients with stable outpatient conditions such as Mr Lee to see an advanced practice nurse.

As a subsidised patient, Mr Lee pays \$9.90 to see Madam Lim, while he would have to fork out \$25 to see a doctor at TISH.

Madam Lim said she has so far not come across any patient who has refused to see her because she is a nurse.

"To reassure patients, I always tell them that the doctor is just next door," she added.

Ironically, Madam Lim's childhood ambition was to be a doctor.

That dream ended when she had to switch secondary schools to one that did not offer a triple science stream. She had qualified for the stream, but had to change schools for personal reasons.

But she has no regrets.

"I never thought nursing was second-best and I don't see it as being inferior to becoming a doctor," she said.

"It's partnership, not mastership, and I see it as a team-based approach."

In 1988, she signed on to become a nurse at an MOH career fair.

"If you give me the choice, I would still be a nurse all over again," she said.