

## Address manpower shortage in health sector, govt urged

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*Public priority: Stakeholders welcome the RM40bil health allocation that reinforces the government's commitment to public health system.*

**PETALING JAYA:** The RM40bil allocation under the 13th Malaysia Plan (13MP) comes as a relief to the healthcare sector. But stakeholders say a solution to manpower issues plaguing the public healthcare sector must be resolved.

They lauded the expansion of pro-health taxes to include tobacco, vape and alcohol, as this would reduce the use of such substances while at the same time increase the government's coffers.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Kalwinder Singh Khaira welcomed the RM40bil allocation for the health sector under the 13MP and the government's commitment to strengthen the public health system.

However, he said addressing the critical shortage of healthcare workers must be prioritised, as this continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing public healthcare facilities.

"We welcome the 13MP initiatives and plans for a national framework for development in the health sector to address human resource needs.

"We hope that these efforts will encompass all healthcare professions in the healthcare ecosystem," he said.

"We note the government's plans to upgrade over 1,700 dilapidated public health clinics and build more healthcare facilities across the country.

"These are timely and necessary steps, but there must be clear timelines for the implementation of each initiative to ensure accountability.

"Planning of human resources must also follow for any new facilities being planned.

"MMA strongly supports the move to strengthen digitalisation, including improvements in health record management and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance healthcare delivery.

"These efforts are crucial to improving continuity of care and enabling data-driven health planning," he added.

Dr Kalwinder said the expansion of pro-health taxes to include tobacco, vape and alcohol is a step in the right direction in curbing the rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

"However, MMA maintains its firm position that a total ban on vaping and vaping products is necessary to protect public health, especially the health of our youth," he said.

Former Health Ministry director Datuk Zainal Ariffin Omar said the RM40bil allocation for health and the upgrade works for 1,776 dilapidated clinics will improve healthcare accessibility, especially in rural and underserved areas, therefore reducing overcrowding in major hospitals.

However, he said the government must ensure the funds are used efficiently, avoid delays and maintain quality amid expansion.

“The health proposals under 13MP are ambitious and yet necessary. It addresses infrastructure gaps, preventive care, and digital transformation. However, execution efficiency, equitable access, tech adoption and adequate staff will determine its success.

“The pro-health taxes align with global best practices but require complementary policies to avoid burdening vulnerable groups,” he said.

The higher taxes, he said, discourage unhealthy consumption and generate revenue for the government’s coffers, adding that the success depends on strict enforcement and public awareness campaigns.

He said this must also be coupled with subsidies for healthy alternatives.

Dr Zainal said while the use of AI can improve diagnostics, predict outbreaks and personalise treatment, it comes with some barriers, which include high costs, the need for trained personnel, and ethical concerns.

He said the RM40bil allocation over the period of five years is reasonable for the underfunded healthcare sector, considering that this is on top of the allocation under the annual budget.

Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh, dean of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s School of Liberal Sciences Public Health Medicine Specialists, said while the initiatives are good, pertinent issues such as low wages for doctors were not addressed.

This, she said, is the cause of doctors leaving the service.

“Building and improving facilities is good, but what if we do not have the manpower for them?” she said.

“I have some reservations on tobacco and vape taxes. While increasing taxes will lead to reduced demand, data has shown that the black market makes up for almost 50% to 60%. This means that most of these products are not taxed.

“Hence, illicit tobacco will be sold cheaper to the consumers. So, increasing the tax on legal products will push smokers to continue buying black market products instead,” she said.

Consumers Association of Penang education officer N.V. Subbarow said the pro-health taxes should be branded as “cancer tax”.