

Contract doctor system a failed policy, says MMA

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MMA president said the implementation of the system had led to more healthcare workers leaving for overseas. - NSTP FILE PIC

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has described the country's contract doctor system, introduced in 2016, as a failed government policy.

MMA president Datuk Dr R. Thirunavukarasu said the implementation of the system had led to more healthcare workers leaving for overseas, as they felt they had no secure future in the public healthcare service.

He said that when the system was introduced 10 years ago, the Health Ministry allegedly did not have a long-term transition plan to address the oversupply of medical graduates and limited permanent posts.

"The contract system is one of the policies that we can say has failed because it has led to doctors feeling completely unappreciated in the medical sector.

"Especially young doctors whose contracts end early, their career pathway is unclear. When they are on contract status, it is difficult to apply for loans.

"They become very disappointed, to the point that many leave the Health Ministry," he said.

He said this when appearing as a guest on the BH Borak Harini podcast titled 'Have they had enough? Why are many young doctors unwilling to work in Malaysia?' at Balai Berita here yesterday.

The contract doctor system in Malaysia, introduced in 2016, involves the appointment of medical officers on five-year contracts.

However, the government is now working to phase out the system and replace it with permanent positions, with efforts to absorb thousands of contract doctors into permanent posts.

Last year, media reports said Singapore had made an aggressive move by holding open interviews in Malaysia to recruit doctors, further worsening the country's healthcare brain drain.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad was previously reported as saying that 440 Health Ministry healthcare professionals left for overseas between 2020 and 2024, comprising five specialists, 54 medical officers and 381 nurses.

The figures were based on resignation notices submitted to respective department heads.

Dr Thirunavukarasu said clear career progression was essential to ensure doctors feel valued.

"Feeling valued is not just about slogans, but must be reflected in implementation. As I

suggested earlier, the career pathway must be clear.

"So they know, if they work here, what their career progression as a doctor and specialist will be," he said.

He said medical officers typically undergo two years of housemanship after graduating from medical school before becoming medical officers.

However, under the contract system, they often have to start over, with no guarantee of job security.

"Career security is unclear. That reduces its attractiveness. But contract systems do exist abroad, though usually for specialists," he said.

On doctor migration, he said it was important for all parties to acknowledge problems in the country's medical workforce policy.

"If we are too defensive and refuse to acknowledge the problem, we will wait until hundreds of thousands leave before taking it seriously.

"That is why, in MMA's view, this is a serious issue. As previously reported, of 5,000 housemanship placements, only about 10 per cent reported for duty in January.

"This is an unhealthy sign. In MMA's view, the issue of migration is very serious," he said.