

Permanent Appointments Alone Won't Solve Doctor Retention In Sabah — MMA

By CodeBlue | 13 July 2026

Permanency alone may not be sufficient to address the challenge of attracting and retaining doctors in Sabah and Sarawak. More attention should be given to measures that improve long-term retention, including greater flexibility in inter-state transfers.



Malaysian Medical Association president Dr R. Arasu speaks at a doctors' rally in Putrajaya on May 6, 2025, to protest the Domestic Trade and Cost of Living Ministry's (KPDN) jurisdiction over mandatory drug price display under the Price Control and Anti-Profiteering Act 2011 (Act 723). Photo by Sam Tham for CodeBlue.

The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) notes [the statement by Deputy Health Minister Hanifah Hajar Taib](#) regarding the reporting rate

of medical officers posted to Sabah and her expectation that approximately half of those

offered permanent positions later this year may not take up the appointment.

We appreciate the ministry's openness in sharing these early observations. Transparency is important, as it allows all stakeholders to better understand the challenges facing our health care workforce.

Permanent appointments have always been an important step towards providing greater job security for our young doctors. However, these figures suggest that permanency alone may not be sufficient to address the longstanding challenge of attracting and retaining doctors in Sabah and Sarawak.

Doctors today consider many factors before accepting a posting. These include family commitments, career progression, opportunities for postgraduate training, financial considerations, housing, relocation support, and the ability to eventually return closer to their families after serving in East Malaysia. Workforce expectations have evolved, and our retention strategies must evolve accordingly.

At this stage, it would be premature to conclude that this represents a national workforce crisis based solely on the Sabah figures. Nevertheless, the findings are sufficiently concerning to warrant closer evaluation as the nationwide exercise progresses.

We look forward to the overall findings, which will help provide a clearer picture of the workforce landscape and guide future policy decisions.

Health care workforce planning should not be measured solely by the number of permanent posts created, but by the number of doctors who remain in service and continue caring for patients where they are needed most.

Moving forward, MMA believes greater attention should be given to measures that improve long-term retention, including greater flexibility in inter-state transfers, a transparent pathway for doctors wishing to return to Peninsular Malaysia after completing their service, appropriate financial and relocation support for doctors serving in East Malaysia, wider access to specialist and subspecialty training, and adequate housing and family support.

Many of these issues extend beyond the Ministry of Health (MOH) alone. Workforce planning and retention require close collaboration between the MOH, the Public Service Department (JPA), and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) to ensure that policies are aligned and responsive to the realities faced by today's health care workforce.

MMA also reiterates its longstanding call for the establishment of an independent health service commission to enable more responsive, healthcare-specific workforce planning and human resource management.

Ultimately, our shared objective is not simply to fill vacancies but to build a sustainable health care workforce that delivers equitable access to quality health care for all Malaysians, particularly those living in Sabah and Sarawak.

MMA remains committed to working collaboratively with the MOH and all relevant stakeholders to achieve this goal.

This statement was issued by MMA president Dr R. Arasu.

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