

NST Leader: Doctors disrupted

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True, we need money to employ more doctors and build hospitals, but establishing a robust public health system is money and more. - NSTP file pic

The Health Ministry is in the news again. This time it is about relocation of doctors who have been given permanent positions.

The doctors should be happy, but they aren't. Here is why. They aren't allowed to go where they want to.

According to media reports, some 4,200 medical officers will be on the move nationwide. Of the number, more than 1,000 are said to want to stay where they are.

The easy answer is for the Health Ministry and the Public Service Department (PSD) to say 'go where we ask you to go'. This is an approach that has lost the human touch. A 1950s idea in 21st century bureaucratic clothing? Surveys after surveys have pointed to doctors being mistreated, not just by their number, but the PSD and Health Ministry.

In the latest, conducted by CodeBlue in January, 73 per cent of 1,652 gave a thumbs down to how they were being treated. Such negative reports must not be treated as the voices of a disgruntled few.

To do so would invite danger for the public health service in the future. Little wonder the country's top doctors' association, the Malaysian Medical Association, reserved its harshest condemnation for the ministry and PSD, "negligence at the highest level", in its response to CodeBlue, a medical portal, on Thursday.

The MMA confirmed the harsh phraseology condemning the ministry and PSD to a query by this Leader.

The MMA has solid grounds. First, the move, more a fiasco, causes great disruption. Medical officers have to up and go and settle in places unfamiliar as suddenly as they arrived there.

Second — this is worse— the relocation will risk patients' lives at certain public hospitals. In the MMA's response to CodeBlue, it named three public hospitals where the risk may be the greatest: Melaka Hospital, Serdang Hospital and Miri Hospital.

Yesterday, in response to this Leader's queries, MMA president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai said healthcare facilities in Kedah, Pahang and other states will also be affected. The question to ask is how these public hospitals— five at the very least— were omitted by the relocation exercise?

These hospitals are not only not getting any medical officer, but are losing between 80 and 100 senior medical officers, a number that is staggering to say the least.

How long must our public health be put on red alert? Perhaps this is the right place to consider Malaysia's doctor-patient ratio.

In 2020, Parliament was told that Malaysia is blessed with one doctor for every 186 patients. This is an impressive ratio, but is it right? If so, why would a relocation of 80 to 100 doctors threaten patients' lives? Just visit our public hospitals and clinics. Do the long queues reflect the reality of the ratio? We say no.

There is something amiss here. The Health Ministry mustn't get us wrong. We are not saying it is not doing anything. It is. Of late, it has been on a fund-hunt mission.

True, we need money to employ more doctors and build hospitals, but establishing a robust public health system is money and more. And it is the more that came under condemnation by the MMA. The Health Ministry and the PSD need to work on their management skills.