

Staff existing hospitals first before building new ones

By **RAGANANTHINI VETHASALAM**

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PETALING JAYA: Constructing hospitals alone will not solve the healthcare crisis. The government must also address the Health Ministry's manpower shortage, says the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA).

It was commenting to a plan for new hospitals in Petaling Jaya and Durian Tunggal.

However, in June alone, several existing hospitals, including in Segamat, Lahad Datu, Pekan and the Duchess of Kent hospital in Sandakan, have faced staffing shortages.

MMA president Datuk Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo said the issue involves the Health Ministry, as well as the Finance Ministry and Public Service Department.

"In the long term, the answer is an independent Health Service Commission with authority over manpower and funding, so that hiring, postings and career progression are no longer constrained by a structure never built for healthcare.

"Build hospitals in Petaling Jaya and Melaka if there is a need, but fill vacant positions and plan the workforce before the first brick is laid."

He said that Malaysia is already short of nearly 11,000 specialists, while nursing vacancies stand at about 18%. Of the 5,000 posts offered to medical graduates, only 529 were filled.

"We are not short of patients. We are short of staff," he added.

Dr Thirunavukarasu cited Hospital Pasir Gudang, which was completed but could not fully operate due to a lack of doctors and nurses.

"That is not a construction failure. It is a workforce planning failure. Without fixing this, we will repeat the same mistake."

It was recently reported that more than half of the 2,271 approved positions at the hospital remain vacant.

Senator Dr RA Lingeshwaran said manpower shortages and hospital construction should not be viewed as competing priorities.

"The question is not whether we should build new hospitals or solve manpower shortages first. We must do both simultaneously.

Malaysia's healthcare needs continue to grow due to population expansion, an ageing population and increasing demand for specialised services," said the former director of Hospital Sungai Bakap.

He said new hospitals in Petaling Jaya, Melaka and other high-demand areas are necessary to improve access and reduce overcrowding. However, infrastructure investment must be matched with investment in people.

“Hospitals do not treat patients; healthcare professionals do. A new hospital without sufficient doctors, nurses and allied personnel is a building, not a functioning healthcare institution.”

Dr Lingeshwaran said retaining healthcare workers should be an immediate priority through better remuneration and working conditions.

He also called for a comprehensive workforce strategy covering recruitment, training and career progression for doctors, nurses, pharmacists, therapists and allied health professionals.

“Expanding healthcare capacity without adequate manpower risks service disruption and places further strain on an already stretched workforce.”

Former Health Ministry director Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin said hospital construction should be done alongside efforts to resolve manpower shortages.

“Hospital construction typically takes three to seven years, while manpower production, especially for specialists and experienced nurses, takes five to more than 10 years,” he said.

To strengthen the manpower pipeline, he proposed bonded scholarships, expanded telemedicine and greater use of nurse practitioners, medical assistants and community health workers for follow-ups, chronic disease management and minor procedures.