

Treat economic hardship as public health crisis, medical association tells govt after Kuantan family tragedy

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Dr Thirunavukarasu says the incident reflected a broader and troubling rise in suicide and severe psychological distress, particularly among working-age Malaysians grappling with mounting financial and social pressures.

KUCHING (Feb 20): The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has urged the government to recognise economic hardship and social instability as critical public health issues following the shocking murder case that claimed the lives of five family members in Kuantan.

Expressing deep sadness over the tragedy, MMA president Datuk Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo said the incident reflected a broader and troubling rise in suicide and severe psychological distress, particularly among working-age

Malaysians grappling with mounting financial and social pressures.

Extending condolences to the affected family and community, he said doctors were increasingly witnessing the mental toll of job losses, heavy debt burdens and the inability to provide for loved ones.

“From front-line experience, we are seeing depression, anxiety, family conflict and, in the worst cases, suicidality linked to overwhelming economic stress,” he said in a statement.

Dr Thirunavukarasu noted that public health evidence shows only a small proportion of a person's wellbeing is determined by medical care, with about 40 per cent shaped by socio-economic factors such as income security, housing stability, food access, education and safe communities.

"When these basic needs are not secure, mental health can deteriorate rapidly, often long before professional help is sought. Socio-economic policy is, in effect, health policy," he said.

While acknowledging the government's targeted subsidies and poverty-eradication initiatives amid rising living costs, the MMA questioned whether vulnerable families were receiving timely and adequate support during sudden income loss or financial crisis.

The association called for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society response, urging closer coordination between the health, finance, economic, education and social welfare sectors.

Severe psychological distress and suicide, he stressed, should not be viewed purely as medical issues but as outcomes shaped by broader socio-economic realities.

Among the measures proposed were strengthened welfare outreach to proactively identify at-risk households, expedited aid to secure food and housing stability, and the integration of mental health screening into social assistance programmes.

At the healthcare level, Dr Thirunavukarasu called for expanded access to stigma-free mental health services at primary care and community settings, shorter referral pathways to specialists, and greater use of tele-counselling.

Employers, he added, should also be encouraged to foster psychologically safe workplaces with confidential counselling support for distressed employees.

He further emphasised the importance of responsible media reporting on suicide and family violence to avoid sensationalism and reduce the risk of copycat incidents, while directing the public to crisis support services.

"MMA stands ready to work with the government, welfare agencies and civil society to address the deeper roots of such tragedies.

"Stabilising incomes, ensuring food and housing security, and strengthening social protection are not merely economic objectives – they are essential health interventions that can save lives.

"As doctors, we treat illness. As a nation, we must prevent despair," said Dr Thirunavukarasu.

According to a preliminary investigation by Royal Malaysia Police, a 32-year-old man is believed to have fatally injured his 28-year-old wife, his 55-year-old mother and his two daughters, aged three and four, before later being found dead at their home in Lorong Cerating Damai on Feb 17.

Pahang police chief Datuk Yahaya Othman said the bodies of the man, his wife and their two young children were discovered in a bedroom of the single-storey terraced house, while the body of the man's mother was found in the kitchen.

He added that visible injuries were observed on the victims.

The incident came to light after the suspect's 15-year-old younger brother, who was also in the house at the time, sought help.