

Housemen still being overworked and bullied, sending some into depression

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Health Ministry will conduct checks on the shift system for housemen in hospitals in the wake of reports that trainee doctors are still being overworked, bullied by seniors as well as suffering from depression.

Under the Graduate Medical Officer Flexi Timetable system, introduced last September, housemen can only work up to 60 hours a week with two days off. But implementation has been reportedly poor at some hospitals.

Health director-general Datuk Seri Dr Hasan Abdul Rahman said the ministry would seek explanations from hospitals found overworking their housemen, adding that the ministry was willing to help them implement the system effectively if they were facing a shortage of housemen.

However, he said he had checked timetables in Kuala Lumpur Hospital, Ampang Hospital, Serdang Hospital, Klang Hospital, Selayang Hospital and Sungai Buloh Hospital but had not seen any houseman made to work for more than five days a week or to do double shifts.

Earlier, Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Mary Cardosa urged the ministry to review the shift system and conduct a study on the mental health of junior doctors.

On the death of Dr Lee Chang Tat, 29, who was found dead in a restroom of the paediatrics ward at Kajang Hospital with a used syringe beside him, she said there was no data to show the number of housemen who suffered from depression due to their long working hours and stress.

“There should be some kind of mechanism to assist troubled doctors, whether they have personal or work-related problems or can’t handle the stress.”

The Malaysian Medical Council, meanwhile, reviews an average of five cases of doctors with mental health issues each month. It is learnt that there were 20 cases last October.

“Most of them are housemen, but we have also heard cases on medical officers,” said former Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Ismail Merican.

“The types of issues range from psychiatric problems to anxiety and coping problems,” Dr Ismail said.

Dr Ismail, who is also former MMC chairman, said the working hours for housemen may not be as demanding as before the shift system was implemented, but they were exposed to other sources of stress in their work including demands from patients, their superiors and other colleagues,” he added.

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