

'Ministry must identify why doctors airing grievances on social media instead of using proper channels'

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• 22-03- 2024 08:32 AM



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KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has lauded Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad for stating his strong stand against bullying in the public healthcare system.

However, its president Dr Azizan Abdul Aziz told theSun the Health Ministry should conduct some serious self-reflection and carry out systemic changes to ensure a safe and supportive environment for all healthcare professionals.

“It is time the ministry looks into why doctors are taking to social media to air complaints of bullying and sexual harassment instead of going through proper channels.

“(I believe) it indicates a significant lack of trust in the existing systems that are supposedly designed to address workplace issues and grievances.”

Azizan said victims of workplace bullying endure significant emotional distress.

However, their complaints are often met with sluggish responses and minimal action, allowing perpetrators to evade the consequences.

She said in an incident in September last year at a Sabah public hospital, a group of doctors used HelpDoc – a support group portal for doctors on MMA’s website – to report bullying and sexual harassment involving specialists and medical officers.

“Despite the matter being escalated to the ministry and assurances of an investigation, subsequent reports suggest it continued. This has raised concerns about the efficacy of the ministry’s complaints adjudication system.

“Something is not right with its system, so we are urging the ministry to establish standard operating procedures for reporting and managing incidents, and to establish a timeline to complete investigations and resolve cases to regain the trust of doctors.”

Azizan also said MMA found it troubling that poison pen letters highlighting bullying and sexual harassment were circulating on social media, and called on public sector doctors to lodge reports through the “appropriate channels”.

She said despite the ministry's inefficiency in resolving complaints, doctors as professional healthcare providers must respect the due process.

"Doctors can continue to lodge their complaints through the Higher Education Ministry's Public Complaints Management System, the ministry's MyHelp portal and HelpDoc.

"If necessary, lodge a police report. We emphasise complaints through these channels as a preferred alternative to seeking justice through public exposure in the media," she said.

Azizan also urged the ministry to look into limiting the powers of heads of departments and hospital directors to allow for a fair hearing of complaints, and called for independent panel members to be included in the ministry's Integrity Unit to achieve a fair hearing on complaints.

On the ministry's establishment of the Healthcare Work Culture Improvement Taskforce in 2022 to review the work culture in public healthcare, Azizan said it was a step in the right direction.

"But there was no follow-through with the implementation of any of MMA's recommendations.

"The government must explain why this is the case, especially if it involves taxpayers' money. The MMA also put forward numerous solutions to combat bullying, yet none were adopted."

Azizan said many of MMA's proposals did not involve additional spending of public funds. One suggestion, for instance, was to hold hospital directors and department heads accountable for bullying cases.

She said the MMA is concerned because by extension, bullying and sexual harassment pose grave risks to patients' and healthcare workers' safety, and must be treated seriously.

“Morale among the public healthcare workforce is at an all-time low given the five-year trend of resignations among contract doctors and specialists in public healthcare. Failing to effectively address bullying will undoubtedly worsen the issue.

“Therefore, we encourage the ministry to engage with government doctors and address their concerns during the annual Rights and Responsibilities of Government Doctors Seminar scheduled for April 20 in Malacca.”