



Don't blame health tourism for loss of specialists, says MMA

26 April 2026

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Malaysian Medical Association president Dr R Thirunavukarasu says the real issue lies within the national health system itself.



No matter how brilliant or dedicated government doctors are, there is simply no room at the top, says the Malaysian Medical Association. (Rawpixel pic)

PETALING JAYA: The Malaysian Medical Association has pushed back against a claim by Parti Sosialis Malaysia that health tourism is driving medical specialists out of the national health system.

MMA president Dr R Thirunavukarasu said the real issue lay within the system itself.

“The public sector is pushing them out. That is the elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about.

“MMA will not allow that finger to be pointed at health tourism,” he told FMT in response to a recent protest march by PSM members to oppose the Malaysia Year of Medical

Tourism 2026, saying public funds should not be used to support private healthcare.

In December, PSM's chairman Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj said private hospitals were luring government specialists away with higher salaries, leading to shortages in key areas such as oncology and cardiology in public hospitals.

Thirunavukarasu said while it is fair to question whether private hospitals are drawing doctors away, the deeper issue is why they are leaving in the first place.

"The answer has nothing to do with health tourism and everything to do with what the public sector has, and has not offered them," he said.

Push factors

He pointed to three main "push factors" which are limited career progression, lack of transparency in promotions, and unsustainable workloads.

The number of JUSA positions (top-tier senior civil service posts) is severely limited, Thirunavukarasu said. "No matter how brilliant or dedicated they are, there is simply no room at the top."

He said unclear promotion pathways had eroded trust among specialists.

"When a specialist cannot understand why a colleague was promoted ahead of them despite similar credentials, trust in the

system erodes," he said. "People do not just leave jobs. They leave systems they no longer believe in."

Heavy workloads and poor work life balance have further worsened retention.

Thirunavukarasu also raised concerns over the rapid expansion of private hospitals, warning it could drain experienced specialists from the public sector.

"When senior specialists leave, they take with them knowledge, mentorship and clinical wisdom that trains the next generation," he said.

More posts at the top

He said health tourism remains a key contributor to the economy and should not be curtailed as it brings in foreign revenue, supports jobs, and has helped position Malaysia as a regional healthcare hub.

The sector had also helped retain talent. "Health tourism has given our specialists a reason to stay in Malaysia, instead of leaving for opportunities abroad," he said.

However, he called on the finance ministry and the public services department to invest in public healthcare and expand the Jusa post structure.

"Create the posts, make promotions transparent, and give specialists a career worth building in public service, and they will stay," he said.