

Doctors' groups want clarity on new MoH funds for 1,500 medical officers



Hartal Doktor Kontrak wants the government to give a clear explanation regarding the Budget 2023 funds for the ministry to pay for 1,500 medical officers. — Reuters file pic

By Soo Wern Jun

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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 26 — *Hartal Doktor Kontrak* (HDK) said the RM36.3 billion allocated to the Health Ministry in Budget 2023 demonstrated the government's commitment to healthcare, but crucial measures still needed clarification.

Among others, it said there must be a clear explanation regarding the funds for the ministry to pay for 1,500 medical officers.

"The RM3 billion for hiring, it didn't specify how many of the 1,500 are permanent or contract," a spokesman for the group representing contract doctors told *Malay Mail* when contacted.

"A more transparent announcement is very much needed."

Th person also pointed out that despite the increase, Malaysia's healthcare funding was still below 5 per cent of GDP that has been recommended to sustainably meet the country's requirements.

“Budget allocated for healthcare is too little compared to developed countries which put welfare of the people as first priority,” the spokesman said.

Still, he said the group was hopeful that the increased funding would help alleviate the congestion at public hospitals, saying that the facilities and healthcare workers were being stretch to their limits.

He also expressed HDK’s gratitude for other health-related benefits in Budget 2023, such as the increase in tax relief for medical treatments to RM10,000 annually and its expansion to cover neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism, Down Syndrome and specific learning disabilities.

“The two tax reliefs also are very much welcomed. HDK would like to thank Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for the announcement,” the spokesperson said.

Separately, the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) also urged the government to furnish details on the MoH recruitment mentioned in Budget 2023.

“The number of new posts (permanent and contract) that will be created does fall short of our expectations given that there are shortages in manpower and a high number of contract doctors in the system.

“More clarity is also needed on the 1,500 positions that have been allocated for medical officers, dental officers and pharmacists.

“It needs to be noted that although this year’s budget is higher than last year’s, the pandemic is now well under control, therefore we believe more funds should be available for utilisation,” the medical association said in a statement.

MMA also asked for clarifications on allocations to repair and upgrade the public healthcare facilities.

“However, we hope there will be transparency in the spending for this purpose and follow-up to ensure it is well implemented.

“We hope that there will be a breakdown provided on the allocations for each healthcare facility and a timeline for its projected completion.

“These details should be put up on the public domain,” MMA said.

Chief executive of the Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy Azrul Mohd Khalib said despite the repeated calls for healthcare to receive funds equivalent to 5 per cent of the GDP, it was not known how much was needed specifically to address the recruitment and retention of healthcare workers, modernise facilities, and implement new health information systems.

“There is no cumulative total available and a system-wide costing of these investments should be done,” Azrul said when contacted.

Until then, he said there should be a moratorium on the building of new hospitals and healthcare facilities.

“We need to concentrate on building and strengthening the workforce which the healthcare system depends on.

“There is no point building new hospitals and clinics if we do not have enough doctors and nurses to staff them and are forced to deprive and stretch existing facilities,” he added.

Azrul also pointed out that for the first time, the treatment of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) was not specifically mentioned in the tabling of the federal budget.

“Previous (budget) speeches have recognised that this country is struggling through a NCD crisis, with one in five people living with diabetes, three in 10 with hypertension, 3.4 million currently live with at least two NCDs, and half of the adult population are either overweight or obese.

“The increasing usage and burden on the public healthcare structure is symptomatic of this crisis. More must be done to help prevent the onset of non-communicable diseases,” he said.

He also said that as it was in the budget of the previous administration, it is disappointing that there is no mention of any commitment to addressing the issue of sustainable healthcare financing and investing in a sustainable long-term solution.

“In order to ensure that Malaysia’s healthcare system is able to continue to provide quality, affordable and accessible health services for all in the decades to come and tackle the challenges of preventing and treating NCDs, of mental health and an aging population, the government must commit itself to finding a way forward on this question.”

As for teaching hospitals under the Ministry of Higher Education, these were again short-changed as their allocations remained relatively close to what they had received in previous years, Azrul said.

“Despite playing a major role in responding to the Covid-19 crisis and still managing caseloads across the country, our teaching hospitals appear to be forgotten.

“Besides carrying out their core function of educating future healthcare workers including nurses and doctors, we need to ensure that such facilities are prepared and equipped to handle a future infectious disease outbreak as part of Malaysia’s epidemic preparedness and response strategy,” he said.