Contract doctors disappointed, many may consider migrating



By Salleh Buang - November 15, 2021 @ 12:15am



NSTP file pic

"THE way we treated our doctors is so shameful." Those were the words of an old friend who came to my place recently upon hearing that my entire neighbourhood had been affected by the air pasang besar.

Thankfully, my house is situated on slightly higher ground and was, therefore, safe from the floodwater.

My friend was particularly upset because so many of these doctors were the frontliners in our war against the Covid-19 pandemic.

In late August, the Southeast Asia Globe news portal stated that many of these contract doctors had suffered financial instability and burnout since 2016.

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With the arrival of Covid-19 to our shores, many were pushed to the brink, finally leading to their recent "Hartal Strike".

Many of us must have seen the image of a young contract doctor, dressed in black, holding a placard during the strike outside Sungai Buloh Hospital in Selangor in late July.

The placard read "Equal Pay, Equal Rights, Equal Opportunity", and below it (in smaller letters) "#Hartal Doktor Kontrak".

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VPoints: 67### Sill Nodus. My Syxp.?? ed-many-may-consider-mi**gratifts disagrewided matre oray in spirit** Some 8,000 contract doctors in public quarantine centres had participated in that strike.

The question is, has anything fruitful come out of it?

According to Kymberley Chu, who wrote the piece "On the front lines, Malaysian contract doctors fight for their rights", the grievances of these contract doctors had, in the past, been "hidden behind stacks of bureaucratic paperwork".

I had worked long enough in government service to know that such "bureaucratic red tape" (which I call BRT) really exists.

According to Dr Yassin, a medical officer in a quarantine centre in Negri Sembilan, contract doctors represent 70 to 80 per cent of the doctors working in quarantine centres, doing 12-hour shifts on a daily basis.

"Burnout becomes a daily thing. When I go to work and come back, I am mentally exhausted.

"My family asks how things are, but I don't want to talk any more.

"You deal with a lot at work. There is no work-life balance," said Dr Natasha, another contract doctor.

In June (the month before the contract doctors' strike), the Health Ministry issued a statement explaining why contract doctors cannot be taken in on a permanent basis.

Such an appointment exercise is "restricted by a set level of vacant positions".

In simple words, we cannot give them permanent posts because there are no such posts at this point in time.

This explains why 163 contract doctors in Selangor quit their posts between January and July.

On Oct 6, a news portal quoted the Hartal Doktor Kontrak (HDK) movement as saying that contract doctors were made to work for more than 24 hours at a stretch, and yet were not being paid overtime.

Speaking on behalf of HDK, Dr Mustapha Kamal said: "This is unfair, considering that doctors often have to work up to 33 hours at a stretch."

On Nov 5, a news portal predicted that there may soon be an exodus of contract doctors from the country, as their request to be absorbed into permanent positions remained unaddressed in the 2022 Budget.

Under the Budget, the government announced that contracts for 10,000 trainee doctors would be extended by another two years.

For Dr Mustapha, this was not the long-term solution that the contract doctors had been hoping for.

Many of these disappointed doctors may consider migrating to other countries to look for a better future.

Earlier on June 29, the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) revealed that only 789 out of 23,077 contract doctors had been given permanent positions in the public healthcare system since 2016

MMA president Dr Koh Kar Chai said that doctors whose contracts with the government had ended may leave for other countries.





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"The issue is not about money. It is the government's failure to respect its contract doctors," said contract doctor MJ, who intends to migrate to Australia.

Disappointed with the Budget, the contract doctors say they may hold another strike next month.

"We feel so used.

"The government is not serious about helping us and it is only using us for the pandemic," said Dr Mustapha.

The writer was a federal counsel at the Attorney-General's Chambers and visiting professor at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. He is now a full-time consultant, trainer and author

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