

Culture of fear leaves junior doctors vulnerable, says MMA

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Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Koh Kar Chai has called on the Health Ministry to review a culture of fear which leaves junior doctors vulnerable to stigma.

In a press conference held at the MMA headquarters, Koh said that there is an existing culture of fear within the current system of training doctors, which he attributed partly to the top brass of the Health Ministry.

He clarified to reporters that this statement was not directed at any specific individual.

“Whenever certain officers speak out against the system, they have been reprimanded, right? So, this is something which we really need to look at,” Koh explained.

He added that junior doctors are also vulnerable and fear repercussions if they file a complaint.

“You must understand this is not just about house officers. This includes the medical officers and the consultants.

Ongoing dialogue

He added that the Health Ministry and its officials are also aware of the issue and there has been ongoing dialogue to solve the issue.

Koh was joined at the press conference today by the MMA honorary general-secretary Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo.

This follows the death of a junior doctor who was suspected of committing suicide on April 17 after working as a house officer for two weeks at the Penang General Hospital.

The case has drawn the concerned attention of the general public - with MPs such as Bandar Kuching MP Kelvin Yii urging the Health Ministry to look into allegations of tough and toxic working conditions for young doctors and ensure the necessary emotional and psychological support.



Dr Koh Kar Chai

Dr Koh Kar Chai Koh went on to address the allegations of toxic working conditions for junior doctors and questioned whether reforms were necessary for the training of house officers.

“Are reforms really needed in the training of house doctors? Everyone is looking at incidences of bullying in the health care sector, particularly among junior doctors.

“We need to define bullying,” said Koh, raising his concern about the liberal use of the word “bullying” itself and how the word is open to being abused.

Misuse of power

He stressed that the MMA does not condone cases of outright bullying involving an obvious misuse of power repeatedly done in an effort to inflict any form of harm.

“High handedness and bullying has been there all this while, not only in these public healthcare institutions but anywhere which employs the system of defining juniors and seniors,” explained Koh. He acknowledged that such incidences had been on the rise with the influx of medical grads in the last few years.

He said that trainee doctors must understand that their training as medical doctors will only begin upon graduation from medical school and that the house officers’ training period is a time when they will be honed as competent doctors.

“The more they are exposed to, the more experience they will obtain to serve them well when they are finally fully registered as a medical practitioner.

“I would like to remind everyone that patient care has never changed throughout the generations and hopefully never will, or it will relegate all doctors to mechanical robots with no heart at all,” Koh stressed.

Lack of cooperation

The MMA claimed that some hospitals were not making adequate use of a complaints mechanism called HelpDoc, which is designed to allow junior doctors to lodge their complaints about issues in the workplace, such as bullying.

The association also noted that since its establishment in 2016, HelpDoc has received over 120 complaints. This includes 36 cases involving bullying.

Koh, however, conceded that there are likely more cases that have gone unreported due to the system’s low uptake.

He commented that the Health Ministry had set up a system where senior clinicians are tasked to look after the welfare of the trainee doctors and put in

place a system where trainee doctors could bring up grouses and complaints to be looked into.

“The only problem is there are ‘black sheep’ hospitals who do not take measures to ensure grouses are looked into.

“(This information) comes from the Health Ministry, recognising that cases of bullying may never be reported for fear of being singled out for further punishment,” said Koh. – Mkini