

Health Ministry, Sabah and S'wak govts to lead on improvements, access to facilities: Deputy minister

Elly Fazaniza

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MMA proposes a special committee of local stakeholders be set up to look into community healthcare needs in Sabah and Sarawak. – Bernamapic

PETALING JAYA: Although the revised Budget 2023 has yet to be presented in Parliament, access to healthcare in Sabah and Sarawak is set to improve under the unity government, with focus on addressing major issues that have been plaguing the two states for years.

Deputy Health Minister Lukanisman Awang Sauni told *theSun* that long-standing issues such as shortage of specialists, poorly maintained medical facilities and access to rural clinics have not been adequately addressed in Sabah and Sarawak.

“Even a list of dilapidated hospitals and clinics has not been compiled to produce comprehensive data. We need this to ensure those who need critical care can avail themselves of it.

"It's important that the Health Ministry and state governments take the lead in this matter. Similarly, we will need a database on causes of death (to reduce mortality rates)," he said, adding that the path to ensuring public health is easily accessible to East Malaysians is a priority although it will take time.

Speaking while en route to a meeting focusing on the healthcare needs of Sabahans and Sarawakians, he said the cause of death of a nine-month-old boy who reportedly stopped breathing while on the way to a hospital in Kuching from a town in Julau, Sarawak, is on the agenda.

The hospital was said to be located six hours away by road. The news became viral on Dec 5, irking netizens and leading some to question why the boy's mother had to travel such a long distance to seek medical assistance.

In response, the state Health Department said in a statement on Dec 9 that the infant had died inside a bus while travelling with his mother from Kuching to Sarikei on Dec 4.

"The infant's mother noticed he was not breathing when they stopped at a bus stop. He was then taken to Betong Hospital and confirmed dead upon arrival. A physical and radiology examination was then conducted.

"However, after discussion with police officers at the Skrang police station in Sri Aman, the infant's family and hospital management decided not to conduct an autopsy," the statement read.

A radiology examination is performed to help verify subtle fractures of facial bones, the skull, spine and pelvis. It may assist to determine the cause of death or help verify the deceased's identity in some cases.

The infant's cause of death has not been ascertained, which also puzzled Lukanisman. He said he was determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

Meanwhile, Health Director-General Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said yesterday the ministry is trying to contact the parents to get the baby's full medical history to facilitate an investigation.

"This is very unique, we are investigating the case. We are not able to locate the parents yet, JKNS (Sarawak Health Department) is investigating the case to get the details before we can make any conclusion," he said on the sidelines of the Academy for Silent Mentor Tripartite Conference.

Apart from the lack of healthcare infrastructure and accessibility for those in rural areas, residents living in some areas in the Lawas district will need to pass through at least two immigration checkpoints in Brunei before they can get to Lawas Hospital.

"This is a long-standing border dispute issue that we must resolve. We had previously presented a working paper as part of our wish list to the federal government," Lukanisman said.

He stressed it was not enough to just allocate additional funding for healthcare in East Malaysia. Instead, he proposed that data be collected to identify the causes of death at hospitals. He said this could indicate the right specialists or medical officers that would be required in the two states.

"To further close the gap in medical expertise, we need to have concrete data that is transparent and available to the public.

"Only then can we send the right experts to the places where they are needed most," he said.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai said addressing access to healthcare services in Sabah and Sarawak needs greater urgency, which is in line with providing universal health coverage.

"MMA proposes that a special committee of local stakeholders be set up to look into community healthcare needs in Sabah and Sarawak. The committee must come up with practical solutions within a stipulated time frame, as many of the issues require urgent attention.

"As Budget 2023 will be tabled again, we propose an additional allocation be set aside to improve healthcare access in the two states. The funds should be used to expand healthcare services there and train rural communities to handle emergencies by equipping them with knowledge of first aid," he added.

Muruga Raj also said mobile clinics should be deployed for scheduled visits to villages in the interior as it is a practical step to take, and would be less costly and quicker to implement.

"For medical guidance and prompt communication, internet connectivity via satellite should be established. Air ambulance services should also be expanded to reach rural communities with poor road access."