

MMA: 2023 Budget must reflect govt's firm commitment to healthcare reforms

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) hopes to see an increase in the national healthcare budget to five per cent of the country's GDP to truly reflect the government's firm commitment to reforms in the healthcare system.

For many years, the nation's healthcare sector has been managing with a miniscule amount and yet delivering a high quality of care, but its facilities are ageing and there are shortages in manpower that is stretching the system, said MMA president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai.

He said a substantial amount will be needed specifically to address the shortages in manpower in public healthcare facilities.

"We still have a long way to go in addressing the issue of contract doctors. We hope

"We also hope there will be increased allocations to support specialisation programmes," he said in a statement today.

Dr Muruga Raj said emphasis was needed to address the acute shortage in specialists and to ensure Malaysia was equipped with specialisations that will be in high demand when the country reaches ageing nation status.

In 2030, Malaysia will reach ageing nation status where 15 per cent of the population will be 60 years or older.

Dr Muruga Raj said ageing public healthcare facilities will need funds for maintenance and upgrades.

"Although most of the facilities are aging, the MMA proposes that a proper assessment be done to determine which facilities need to be given priority.

"New facilities are also needed especially to reach rural communities and ensure equal distribution of healthcare services nationwide in line with the aims of ensuring Universal Health Coverage (UHC).

"The deep interiors of Sabah and Sarawak are where these efforts are needed the most. There is need also for a respiratory centre in Kedah.

"We hope funds will also be injected into the setting up of specialised centres in the North and South of Peninsula Malaysia as there are still patients traveling to Kuala Lumpur and Selangor for certain specialist care services," he said.

He said the development of manpower must be made in tandem with the building of infrastructure to avoid 'white elephants' as un-utilised infrastructure due to lack of manpower.

"If there are new facilities being built, we will also need roads and other conveniences for access.

"This supporting infrastructure should not be coming out of the healthcare budget but perhaps budgeted under relevant ministries such as the housing and local government ministry," he said.

Dr Muruga Raj said that medicine security is even more crucial now, as evidenced by the current prolonged disruption of medical supply in the country.

"Attention will need to be given to this important area in the planning of the healthcare budget 2023. The health ministry could also look into investment in our own R&D to enable us to reduce dependency on foreign pharmaceuticals," he said.

He said that in line with the ministry's plan to give workers an additional day's leave to undergo health screening, the government could also increase the current tax incentives for working adults to further encourage them to go for health screening.

Dr Muruga Raj said MMA hopes that there will also be allocations to enhance primary care delivery in government healthcare facilities and in the private sector through public private collaborations.

"The 8,000 over private GPs nationwide, as witnessed during the pandemic, have an important role in the country's healthcare system. The government should take advantage of this wide distribution of private GP clinics in the delivery of healthcare through programmes for the communities," he said.

More allocations were also needed for public health to prevent Communicable Diseases (CD) and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) and for health promotion and enforcement under the Health Ministry's Inspectorate Unit.

"MMA is deeply concerned over the rising cases of NCDs. To encourage Malaysians to adopt a healthy lifestyle, the government should increase tax incentives for those regularly engaging in sports and fitness activities and for purchase of sports equipment," said Dr Muruga Raj.