

MMA, lawyers urge govt to revamp country's healthcare system



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by JUNE MOH

A NEW and more sustainable model of financing the healthcare system is needed.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai said this is due to the current model only allowing for limited expansion in healthcare's human resources, services and infrastructure.

He added that a new financing model and controlling the numbers of medical student intakes are the main steps the government and relevant stakeholders need to take to address the country's contract doctor issue.

"We believe some control is needed (to control) medical students' intake and the number of recognised medical degrees.

"Every year, we are producing between 3,000 and 5,000 medical graduates from 36 public and private medical schools as well as a number of foreign medical schools," Dr Muruga told *The Malaysian Reserve (TMR)*.

He said addressing the issue took time and required a gradual process. Although the association did not have a set timeframe, it had seen increasing commitment shown by the government to resolve the issue.

The creation of 12,800 permanent posts in three years and the setting up of a high-level committee are positive developments, he said.

"Of the total, 4,300 permanent positions are given this year. The Health Ministry (MoH) is also looking into ways to increase the number of permanent positions.

"One of the options being considered is permanent positions without pension. We believe Employees Provident Fund (EPF) contributions are an alternative likely being looked into.

"The Health White Paper (HWP) — expected to be tabled (in Parliament) soon — will be important as certain reforms in our healthcare system will be key to better healthcare human resources planning, which is necessary towards resolving the contract doctor issue," he told *TMR*, adding that MMA is also involved in the HWP represented by its exco member Dr Koh Kar Chai.

Dr Muruga said apart from permanent posts, more attention needs to be given to creating a more conducive work environment for contract doctors, with fair treatment given to all junior doctors regardless of status.

"It should be made a priority when the high-level committee is formed, which we hope to see an update soon," he said.



MMA is also involved in the HWP represented by its exco member Dr Koh (Pic source: Dr Koh's Twitter)

Lawyer Dinesh Muthal concurred with Dr Muruga, saying the MoH must identify its need for doctors every year.

The Petaling Jaya-based lawyer said the absorption rate of medical officers must be justified against the overall population growth of the country and to gradually increase the number of permanent positions for doctors yearly.

“When there are many contract doctors taken in the first place, it truly means that that is the number of doctors needed in the country, hence there is nothing wrong with converting the jobs of these contract doctors into permanent positions.

“But if that is not the case, it is better to have a check and balance system or a mechanism or a commission set up to identify the numbers truly needed.

“If there is not a big need, then the number of medical colleges as well as medical student intakes must be reviewed and regulated (to ensure) there is no oversupply of doctors or medical graduates from unregulated or improperly regulated universities,” Dinesh told *TMR*.

No Automatic Absorption

At the same time, he said, the absorption should not be automatic. There needs to be progression and the performance of doctors must be taken into account as the medical profession demands the best quality doctors to be appointed for the people.

He said to ensure equality and welfare of contract doctors, they should not be treated in any way differently than permanent position doctors, higher allowance should be provided for on-call duties, annual leaves should be similar to permanent doctors and work schedules and perks should be similar as well.



Khabir says the provision of public healthcare in Malaysia was a matter of policy for too long

Meanwhile, lawyer Khabir Dhillon said the provision of public healthcare in Malaysia was a matter of policy for too long and a solid national healthcare plan is required, backed by legislation, to synergise healthcare being provided at the federal level including those with universities and private healthcare facilities.

The Kuala Lumpur-based lawyer said a healthcare commission might be desirable to synergise and regulate matters such as the minimum

remuneration for healthcare providers, just like how medical charges to patients are regulated.

“The commission might also temper the profit-driven forces being operated in the healthcare sphere in Malaysia.

“It is desirable that every healthcare facility in Malaysia, whether private or public, remains strongly a centre for continuous learning just like how the university hospitals are. “The commission should also take over the jurisdiction to discipline healthcare providers from the medical council, similar to the Advocates and Solicitors Disciplinary Board, which was created to take over from the Bar Council its jurisdiction to discipline lawyers,” Khabir told *TMR*.

Continuous Engagement

Health Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa promised that her ministry would have constant engagement with Hartal Doktor Kontrak (HDK) and other related parties to address the contract doctors-permanent positions issue after a meeting with HDK on April 11, 2023.

Dr Zaliha told the representatives of HDK that having constant engagements was intended for the latter to act as a middle person between contract doctors and the government.

This came after HDK’s representatives handed over a memorandum to Dr Zaliha requesting their inclusion in the government’s high-level committee to resolve contract doctor issues.

The request came after the group expressed their interest in April in being part of the newly formed inter-ministerial and inter-agency committee to tackle contract doctors’ plight. The committee is chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

HDK spokesperson Dr Yassin Muhammad said the health minister acknowledged the difficulties of including an HDK representative in the high-level committee due to its Cabinet-level status.

According to Dr Yassin, Dr Zaliha also said during the meeting that the Health White Paper, set to be tabled in Parliament in June, will include recommendations to establish a Health Service Commission and Health Reform Commission.

Currently, there are 20,300 contract doctors and about 5,000 new contracts are signed every year.

HDK pointed out that the government's previous announcement of 12,800 permanent positions would only cover 30% of contract doctors after three years, leaving the other 70% without job security.

"Therefore, we emphasise the need for a Health Service Commission, which would have greater authority to manage the human resources of contract doctors," Dr Yassin said.

He added that the HDK had not yet discussed the possibility of another strike, after a previous strike by Mogok Doktor Kontrak, a group that claimed to represent contract doctors and healthcare workers, was unsuccessful.