

'Have more hospitals - and docs'

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PETALING JAYA: More hospitals and health clinics are needed to handle the acute congestion and long waiting hours in public healthcare facilities, say medical groups.

There is also a need to increase the number of staff in many health clinics, they say.

According to the Health Ministry, there are 145 hospitals and over 2,000 health clinics including Mother and Child clinics as well as village clinics.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai said these facilities were now overcrowded, with long waiting times, especially for the elderly.

"Both healthcare facilities and the workforce need to be expanded," he said.

"We will reach ageing nation status in 2030 with 15% of the population being 60 years or older. Older persons will have more healthcare needs," he added.

Dr Muruga Raj said more than half of the country was dependent on public healthcare but the expansion of these facilities was slow, leading to overcrowding.

Budgeting issues, he said, were the reason behind the lack of permanent positions for healthcare workers.

"We believe funds can be set aside if healthcare is prioritised. If billions are spent on mega projects, I don't see why the same cannot be done for healthcare services.

"We saw how health became the nation's top priority when the country was hit with the Covid-19 pandemic. For years prior to that, we were underspending on healthcare.

"We still are underspending but I hope there is greater awareness of the importance of the healthcare system now," he added.

Dr Muruga Raj said the red and yellow zones in public hospitals were always given the highest priority.

"It is the green zone (non-critical cases) which is always the issue as most patients come with simple illnesses. This is where a long-term solution is needed," he said.

He added that the public, too, must be educated on the categories of illnesses that did not require immediate medical attention.

"The government must also look at bed utilisation to reduce admission. For example, normal birth delivery cases take up the bulk of beds," he said.

The Health Ministry has successfully implemented a Low Risk Maternity Hospital in Putrajaya near the main hospital, where cases can be referred to if there are complications.

Dr Muruga Raj said a similar model should be considered for other major hospitals to free up congestion.

Hartal Doktor Kontrak agreed that the manpower shortage was not the only problem that caused congestion at public healthcare facilities, but also the lack of facilities.

The movement's spokesman Dr Muhammad Yassin said there was a need for more hospitals and health clinics.

However, he said, it was more urgent to increase the staff numbers.

"Having many health facilities with too few staff will be of little help," he said.

The shortage of healthcare facilities remains a problem in certain areas, especially in the outskirts and parts of Sabah and Sarawak.

"The ministry needs to find a way to decongest the emergency department. Extending the health clinic operating hours will only increase the burden on the staff there," he said.

"A bigger workforce is needed and we have to prevent people from leaving the service."

Muhammad said Hartal was also pushing for formation of a health services commission so the ministry would have autonomy in deciding its staff numbers, instead of relying on the Public Services Commission's quota.

Health Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa said last week that the ministry was expecting 30 healthcare facility projects to be operational soon.

These include Hospital Pendang in Kedah, Hospital Kemaman in Terengganu and the Beaufort Hospital in Sabah. The Tawau Hospital is also being renovated.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah also said last month that the ministry was underfunded.

"We are underfunded, understaffed, underpaid, overworked, overstretched and overcrowded with patients," he said, adding that there was a need to increase the number of healthcare workers, and to improve salaries and positions.

He was responding to a tweet on the brain drain in the medical fraternity.

Code Blue, a healthcare news portal, reported last month that critically-ill patients, including those on ventilation, had been stranded for up to six days in the red zone of Ipoh's Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun emergency room due to a shortage of critical care beds and staff.