Abolish contract system to retain doctors in public healthcare, says MMA

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PETALING JAYA: Abolish the contract system to retain doctors in the public healthcare system, the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has said in the wake of a viral post of Singapore recruiting Malaysian doctors.

“The MMA refers to the viral reports of the Singaporean recruitment drive in Kuala Lumpur, targeting Malaysian doctors with attractive remuneration packages. While MMA respects the rights of individuals to seek opportunities abroad, we urge the government to take serious note of the increasing consequences of such recruitment.

"Although Singapore has long recruited Malaysian healthcare professionals, recent developments suggest an intensification of these efforts, likely driven by growing healthcare demands in the island nation,” MMA president Datuk Dr Kalwinder Singh Khaira said in a statement Friday (July 11).

"The potential impact on Malaysia’s public healthcare services is significant and cannot be understated. We are already experiencing critical shortages of healthcare workers in many public facilities across the country. This is especially so in Sarawak and Sabah where shortages have led to calls for more autonomy to allow these states to fill up the long-standing shortages of Medical Officers (MOs) and Specialists.

"The loss of even more medical professionals to neighbouring countries and also to the UK, Australia and Ireland will further strain our delivery system. MMA has highlighted this issue of healthcare worker shortages many times and has voiced it to both the Health Ministry and publicly,” he added.

He said the utmost importance now is for the government to immediately implement effective strategies to retain doctors in the public sector.

He called for the contract system to be abolished for new doctors joining service and the previous policy of permanent positions with a probationary period to be reinstated.

“The indication for the contract system was due to a dramatic increase in new graduating doctors and the shortage of permanent posts a decade ago. This is not the case now as the numbers have dropped drastically and hence there are and should be enough posts for direct recruitment into permanent posts.

"This will provide job security and do away with the present burdensome contract offer of 3+2+2+4 years, which leads to uncertainty of career progression. This will also encourage students and parents to see the medical profession as one with a future,” he said.

He said the government must fulfil the promise it made last year which was to increase on-call allowances of doctors.

“The Government must expedite this long-overdue increase in on-call allowance rates for doctors in the public sector. There must be an understanding that retaining healthcare workers will come at a cost. A special budget must be allocated for emoluments and on-call allowances for doctors and nurses who are the backbone of the healthcare delivery in the country and toil long hours taking care of the rakyat. The present rates do not do justice to the services of our doctors,” he said.

Aside from that, there must be clearer and open career pathways, that will provide transparency and structured opportunities for doctors to specialise and progress within the healthcare system, Dr Kalwinder added.

“The ministry has been recognised as a training provider under the amended Medical Act and new regulations and hence must step up its role in the training of doctors in all its hospitals across the country where there are adequate capabilities. This not only allows doctors to stay and train in places where they are posted without the worry of transfers and rotations, but will also allow better service in all areas of the country where training takes place,” he said.

"Allow specialist training under the parallel pathway postgraduate programmes in Health Ministry hospitals to be done without the need for taking up the compulsory Hadiah Latihan Persekutuan (HLP). This policy comes with numerical restrictions as monetary costs are involved and hence limits the numbers of doctors that can take up specialisation training every year.”

Dr Kalwinder said that opening up training slots without HLP and with multiple entries a year will allow more to join and train in the ministry’s facilities.

"This is a system that was in place for many years and worked very well, training thousands of specialists especially in the field of medicine and paediatrics,” he added.

He also called for current policies to be amended to ensure travel and cargo reimbursements are allowed for all inter-state transfers for those going from contract to permanent posts especially from Peninsular Malaysia to Sabah and Sarawak and vice versa.

He also wants the Bayaran Insentif Wilayah (BIW) disparity, which has caused a discrepancy in the take-home salaries of doctors transferred within regions after Dec 1, 2024 to be rectified.

“This has caused more doctors to refrain from going to Sabah and Sarawak. This policy, which sees doctors of similar seniority being paid differently for the same work and responsibility, needs to be reviewed and rectified,” he said.

MMA reiterated that retaining our doctors must be a national priority.

"Delaying action risks causing irreparable harm and compromising the quality and accessibility of healthcare for the majority of Malaysians who are dependent on public healthcare services,” he added.

On Thursday (July 10), a social media post allegedly of the Singapore Health Ministry directly recruiting Malaysian doctors had gone viral. The remuneration package offered comes with a starting salary of SG$110,000 (approximately RM385,000) per annum, excluding monthly accommodation allowance, insurance, and other benefits.