

MMA calls for greater investment in specialist training, doctor retention

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The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Sivanaesan Letchumanan says permanent appointments for contract doctors are a step forward, but more investment is needed to retain experienced doctors and address Malaysia's specialist shortage. – NSTP pic

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has welcomed plans to offer permanent positions to more than 9,000 contract doctors in 2027, but called for stronger measures to retain experienced doctors and address the critical specialist shortage.

MMA president Dr Sivanaesan Letchumanan said Malaysia faced a shortfall of nearly 11,000 specialists, with demand for specialist care expected to rise as the population aged and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) became more prevalent.

He said offering permanent appointments to contract doctors who successfully completed housemanship was a significant milestone and addressed one of the association's longstanding calls.

"We commend the government for taking this important step towards providing greater job security and career certainty for our young doctors," he said in a statement today.

However, he said stronger commitments were needed to retain healthcare personnel and address the specialist shortage.

"We cannot afford to lose more specialists when we urgently need to train and retain more of them," he added.

Dr Sivanaesan also called for greater investment in specialist and subspecialist training, clearer career progression, fair remuneration and better working conditions to prevent experienced doctors from leaving the public service.

He said that ending the contract doctor system should not mark the end of efforts to strengthen the healthcare workforce.

"Permanent appointments are an important step forward, but they must be supported by a comprehensive workforce retention strategy," he said.

MMA also welcomed the increase in the Health Ministry's allocation to RM47.7 billion under the 2027 Budget, from RM46.5 billion this year.

However, it called for adequate funding to address critical manpower shortages in Sabah and Sarawak through better incentives, improved working conditions and stronger career development opportunities.

The association reiterated its call for the government to reinstate the previous percentage-based Regional Incentive Payment to help address the challenges faced by healthcare personnel serving in the two states.

On the Flying Doctor Service, MMA welcomed the increase in incentives from RM30 to RM100 but said the revised amount remained inadequate given the demanding conditions and safety risks involved in providing healthcare to remote communities.

It said healthcare personnel serving in such areas deserved compensation commensurate with the challenges and risks they faced.

MMA urged the government to review the incentive further and prioritise operational safety, aircraft maintenance and personnel protection.

The association also welcomed investments in medical equipment, healthcare digitalisation and public-private collaboration.

However, it said that the RM1.2 billion allocation for hospital and clinic maintenance remained unchanged from this year, despite ageing facilities and growing maintenance needs.

MMA said a higher allocation would have helped ensure public healthcare facilities remained safe, functional and capable of meeting rising patient demand.

It also called for greater emphasis on primary healthcare to reduce the burden of NCDs and ease pressure on hospitals and specialist services.

Dr Sivanaesan said Malaysia's extensive network of private general practitioners remained underutilised and should play a greater role in prevention, early detection and long-term disease management.

Stronger primary healthcare services could reduce avoidable hospital admissions and allow specialist services to focus on patients requiring more complex treatment, he said.

MMA said the success of the 2027 Budget should be measured by tangible improvements in patient care, waiting times, workforce retention and access to healthcare, rather than the size of allocations alone.

The association also reiterated its call for a national healthcare workforce distribution dashboard to provide transparent information on staffing levels and manpower shortages at individual public hospitals and clinics.

It said the dashboard would support more effective workforce planning and help direct resources to facilities and communities with the greatest needs.

Dr Sivanaesan acknowledged the government's efforts and fiscal constraints but added that healthcare investment needed to keep pace with an ageing population and the rising burden of disease.

MMA said it remained committed to working with the government to ensure the 2027 Budget delivered meaningful and lasting improvements to Malaysia's healthcare system.