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This is not a role for the ministry

THE Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) views with deep concern the announcement that a "primary agency to promote and develop the country's health tourism industry" has been set up within our Health Ministry. This council, the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC), is supposedly also to "position Malaysia as a healthcare hub in the region". It will report to an advisory committee chaired by the health minister.

Members of this council are representatives from the government and the private sector involved in health tourism.

By right, there should be a very clear separation between the public and private sectors when it comes to healthcare.

This is because the government is responsible for regulating the private healthcare sector and carrying out enforcement duties. With this move of having an agency within the ministry itself promoting a "health tourism industry", there is bound to be a major conflict of interest.

How can the ministry regulate and enforce laws when it is, at the same time, involved in promotional activities for this very same industry?

There will be the tendency to "close one eye" or to "water down" laws to favour the industry.

Seeing the way the top people in the ministry — the health minister and the director-general — are going all out to publicly support health tourism, it appears that the ministry is letting the public know that its priority is turning more towards business.

CAP and other concerned public interest groups have repeatedly protested the ministry's move to promote and encourage health tourism, to no avail.

At the moment, government hospitals are still critically understaffed. Key specialists are serving instead in the private sector.

Faced with long waiting times, patients sometimes resort to seeking treatment at private healthcare facilities. This is often in spite of the charges at these facilities being something they can ill afford.

As patient load and services at private healthcare facilities increase due to aggressive promotion of services, charges for treatment go up.

The private sector will also have increased needs for medical staff and it will move to attract staff from government hospitals. At the moment, government hospitals are in no position to match the remuneration offered by the private sector.

Even with the previous regulations to restrict advertising, there are still numerous occasions when advertisers

flout the law. CAP has had to bring some of these cases to the authorities' attention for action to be taken.

Are the ministry officials in a position to monitor that advertisers stay within the ambit of the law? Instead of stepping up enforcement, there now seems to be a leaning towards relaxing the laws to promote health tourism.

The health minister was quoted as saying: "These are very old policies that will stagnate the industry. With this new government policy, we will overhaul all existing policies (on medical advertising)."

At the "Health Systems in Transition" workshop held in May this year, health experts warned that the overall quality of healthcare in the country would suffer if medical tourism is allowed to sap medical staff in public hospitals.

Associate Prof Dr Trude Bennet of North Carolina's Chapel Hill University was quoted as saying that "the glamour and profitability of medical tourism tended to crowd out public health".

She went on to say that "government resources such as land, financial subsidies and tax incentives tend to be diverted to start up private facilities with high technology. Meanwhile, public health services and primary care will be left to languish".

University Malaya Medical Centre infectious disease head, Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman, pointed out that the lure of medical tourism could lead to a brain drain, resulting in the lack of senior doctors and specialists to mentor younger medical staff. This would lead to a low quality of staff in the public sector, and eventually, those who leave for the private sector would also be of low calibre.

It is still not too late. CAP calls on the ministry to halt this alarming trend towards being totally involved in encouraging health tourism.

Emphasis should be placed on addressing the shortfalls that are ailing our present healthcare system. The increasing and alarming rates of dengue, diabetes, heart diseases, cancer, hypertension, obesity, AIDS, deaths from smoking and the resurgence of tuberculosis, just to name a few, need the full attention of the ministry.

The ministry should remain independent and play its role to regulate the private healthcare sector. There should not be a travel agency housed in the Health Ministry

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