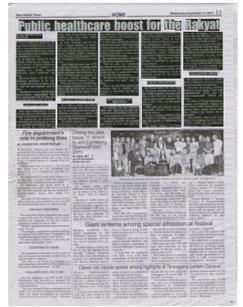


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Public healthcare boost for the Rakyat

By **ALI IMRAN MOHD NOORDIN**

KUALA LUMPUR: Gone are the days when diseases such as malaria, yellow fever or tuberculosis posed a serious threat to Malaysians, thanks to the country's well developed public healthcare services.

In an interview, Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, the Deputy Director General of Health (Medical), told Bernama of the ministry's aspirations to further upgrade Malaysian public healthcare services.

The story begins with the transformation undergone by the public-health sector and its future plans to keep up with demand, said Dr Noor.

"Healthcare services are not just a doctor-patient relationship, they have transformed into an important economic driver as well," he said.

THE EARLY FOCUS

Ever since independence, the focus has been on providing greater access to healthcare for all citizens.

"To achieve this, the government channelled service through all mediums possible, especially to rural areas, through the creation of rural

health staff, flying-doctors service, mobile teams and village health teams," Dr Noor said.

In 2009, Malaysia was the region's biggest spender on healthcare, according to the World Bank, devoting 4.8 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared with Thailand (4.3), Singapore (3.9), the Philippines (3.8) and Indonesia (2.4).

Today, there are more than 3,700 healthcare facilities including about 3,500 clinics, more than 130 hospitals, and many other healthcare-related facilities such as medical institutions, medical colleges, laboratories, and the Malaysia Clinic.

While the healthcare infrastructure has reached a satisfactory level, Dr Noor said the focus now is toward improving the service quality at all levels.

QUALITY MATTERS NOW

"It is time to ensure the balance between facilities and service quality," he said, adding that this is highly pertinent nowadays, as patients are increasingly discerning about service delivery and performance.

The health ministry has charted a work plan to boost quality of service at its facilities, starting with attract-

ing, employing and retaining highly skilled doctors with attractive remuneration packages.

Dr Noor also said that the ministry currently has about 8,000 housemen to be absorbed into service. They will be given opportunities to further their studies, in an effort to create a new batch of future specialists.

Decongesting hospitals is also part of the quality-upgrade approach.

"That is why we introduced day-care services and day-of-surgery admissions, which minimises the length of stay at wards and creates more room for other patients.

"We have also introduced delivery of medicine via mail," said Dr Noor.

"This is an important step toward reducing visits to hospital, while making it convenient for the patient."

SPECIALISING AND BRANDING

The ministry has also embarked upon new directions in skill specialisation and branding of service.

"A few hospitals have been chosen to be specialty centres," he said.

"Selayang Hospital, for example, specialises in liver and hand microsurgery.

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Putrajaya Hospital specialises in endocrine problems and serves as the National Cancer Centre as well. Sarawak General Hospital specialises in cardiothoracic diseases."

Penang Hospital also specialises in cardiothoracic surgery, plastic and reconstructive surgery, cranofacial and Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans. The National Heart Institute is dedicated to cardiothoracic diseases.

"We hope to remain competitive in providing services to the public, thus making public healthcare services a preferred avenue for the people," said Dr Noor.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Siti Balqis Salim, 26, who went to Putrajaya Hospital recently for her routine antenatal checkup, said that at first she had some reservations about public hospitals. But after a few visits, her perception changed.

"The staffs were friendly and approachable," she said. "I am satisfied with the service."

A tour of Putrajaya Health Clinic in Presint 9 revealed, surprisingly, that the facility is frequented by elites.

For Datuk Andrew Tan Koon

Teck, the Managing Director of Ocean Pictures Sdn Bhd, a recent visit to the clinic was his first time ever at a public health facility.

He decided to go there after hearing good reviews about the clinic.

"The system is good, the doctors are friendly and able to explain to the patient thoroughly," he said. "I am satisfied."

His only criticism was that signage at the clinic could be both in Malay and English, to accommodate visitors from various backgrounds.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The challenges ahead for public health in Malaysia are more centered on diseases than infrastructure.

Like other developing countries, Malaysia faces threats from both communicable (CD) and the non-communicable (NCD) diseases.

Examples of CD are tuberculosis, dengue, viral hepatitis, malaria and HIV/AIDS, while among NCDs are mental illness, stroke, cancer, asthma, diabetes, and injuries due to accidents.

"The ministry needs to put extra effort in combating the two, which creates another set of challenges," said Dr Noor. - Bernama