

KUALA LUMPUR, SEPT. 12 (BERNAMA) -- THE MOVE TO PRIVATISE HOSPITALS DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS ABOUT TO DEPRIVE THE POOR OF FREE MEDICAL TREATMENT, PRIME MINISTER DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD SAID TODAY.

THE MOVE WAS AIMED AT CUTTING DOWN THE RAPID ESCALATING COSTS, HE SAID.

HE SAID THE GOVERNMENT DECIDED TO PRIVATISE SOME OF ITS SOCIAL FACILITIES ONLY AFTER PAYING SERIOUS ATTENTION TO THE TECHNOLOGY OF CUTTING DOWN COSTS.

OPENING THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL COMBINED SCIENTIFIC MEETING HERE, HE SAID THAT WITH THE PRIVATISATION OF THE HOSPITALS ONLY THE NEEDY WOULD BE ACCORDED FREE TREATMENT.

THE MEETING WAS ORGANISED BY THE COLLEGES OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS, PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS.

DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR SAID THAT UNDER THE PRESENT SYSTEM EVEN THOSE WHO COULD AFFORD PAYMENT WERE AVOIDING PAYMENT.

EVEN FIRMS WHICH SHOULD HAVE TAKEN MEDICAL INSURANCE FOR THEIR EMPLOYEES WERE AVAILING THEMSELVES TO FREE TREATMENT, HE ADDED.

EXPLAINING FURTHER THE GOVERNMENT'S MOVE, HE SAID THAT PRIVATISATION OF HOSPITALS WOULD INITIALLY MEAN MAKING GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL FACILITIES AVAILABLE TO PRIVATE DOCTORS FOR A FEE.

THE GOVERNMENT, HOWEVER, WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO RECOVER ALL ITS COSTS AND, IN FACT, AN ELEMENT OF SUBSIDY WOULD BE CONTINUED.

DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR, TRACING THE HISTORY OF THE PRESENT MEDICAL SYSTEM, SAID THE COLONIAL GOVERNMENT STARTED GOVERNMENT HOSPITALS TO PROVIDE FREE FACILITIES FOR ITS OFFICERS AND ALSO TO ENCOURAGE THE LOCALS TO SWITCH TO WESTERN MEDICINE.

COMPARED TO THOSE DAYS WHEN MIXTURES AND POWDERS COST ONLY A FEW CENTS, MEDICAL COSTS TODAY HAD BECOME EXTREMELY EXPENSIVE, HE ADDED.

HE SAID THE COUNTRY'S FREE MEDICAL TREATMENT HAD BECOME A HEAVY BURDEN TO THE GOVERNMENT AND THE TREND WAS FOR THE BURDEN TO BECOME HEAVIER.

HE SAID IT WAS NOT A PROBLEM FOR THE GOVERNMENT ALONE BUT FOR THE NATION AS A WHOLE, BECAUSE THE TREATMENT WAS NOT REALLY FREE AS TAXPAYERS WERE PAYING FOR IT.

THE QUESTION THEY SHOULD ASK WAS WHETHER THEIR MONEY WAS BEING SPENT ON THE DESERVING POOR OR COULD IT BE POSSIBLE THAT SOME BUSINESS CONCERNS, INCLUDING INSURANCE FIRMS, WERE TAKING A FREE RIDE, HE ADDED.

HE CALLED ON THE DELEGATES TO PONDER ON THE QUESTION OF ESCALATING MEDICAL COSTS.

REFERRING TO THE THREE COLLEGES WHICH WERE ORGANISING THE MEETING, HE SAID A MULTIPLICITY OF ORGANISATIONS WOULD ONLY CAUSE CONFUSION.

IF THE COLLEGES COULD NOT MERGE, THEY SHOULD AT LEAST WORK TOGETHER, HE ADDED.

MEDICAL SPECIALISTS ATTENDING THE MEETING INCLUDE THOSE FROM SINGAPORE, THAILAND, AUSTRALIA, HONG KONG, BRITAIN, SAUDI ARABIA, SCOTLAND AND MALAYSIA.

THE FOUR-DAY MEETING INCLUDED A PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM TODAY, IN WHICH MASS MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES WERE PARTICIPATING. -- BERNAMA