

Dr M: Privatisation won't deprive poor of free treatment

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad assured the public today that the Government's plans to privatise the medical services would not cause the poor to be deprived of free medical treatment.

He said the Government had decided to make facilities in government hospitals available to private doctors for a fee and this would bring substantial recovery of the costs expended.

He pointed out that under the present system — where only nominal fees are charged on those using Government medical facilities — enabled those who could afford payment to avoid paying altogether.

"Firms which should have taken medical insurance for their employees are availing themselves to free treatment.

"With privatisation, only the needy would be given free treatment," he said when opening the Second International Combined Scientific Meeting of the Colleges of General Practitioners, Physicians and Surgeons of Malaysia here.

He said that although Malaysia was a developing country, it still wanted the

best of modern medicine. But limited resources meant that it would lag behind in the provision of some of the most sophisticated facilities.

Malaysia's medical problems, he added, were compounded by the system of medical treatment inherited from the British colonial government where only nominal fees were charged.

HP explained that this had been done during the colonial period to encourage the local people to switch to modern medicine. However, rising costs made free medical treatment a heavy burden.

Dr Mahathir said that this was a problem not only for the Government but the nation as a whole.

Medical treatment, he added, was not really free as the people were paying for it indirectly and they should ask themselves whether the money was being spent on the right people — the deserving poor.

He urged doctors to be more conscious about cutting costs but said that in so doing, they should strive to retain a certain degree of personal relationship with their patients which makes their work meaningful.

Earlier, College of Gen-

eral Practitioners president Dr Syed Mahmood Syed Hussein said that as a nation in transition, Malaysians lived with the medical problems of development and under-development.

He pointed out that cardiovascular diseases had already become the top killer in the country together with cancer and traffic and industrial accidents while malaria and gastroenteritis was still prevalent.

At the same time, he said, the problems of providing safe water, efficient sewage disposal and a secure environment had yet to be overcome although the people had come to expect the latest in medical technology.

Dr Syed Mahmood felt that a dedicated profession would be able to achieve the best for the people's health.

He added that continuing medical education was essential for all practising doctors.

The rapid advancement of medical technology meant that doctors would not be able to keep up with the demands of good medical care unless they took an active part in continuing their medical education, he explained.