

The poor will still get 'free' medical care: PM

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today gave an assurance that the poor will not be deprived of free medical treatment when the decision to privatise some of the Government's social facilities is implemented.

The Prime Minister, at the same time, chided certain business concerns and insurance companies for taking a free ride on what he termed as "possibly the only non-contributory medical insurance scheme in the world."

"Firms which should have taken medical insurance for their employees are availing themselves of free treatment at Government Hospitals.

"With privatisation, only the needy would be accorded free treat-

ment." The Prime Minister was opening the *Second International Combined Scientific Meeting* organised by the colleges of general practitioners, physicians and surgeons. He said it was because of the high cost of medicine which deprived the poor of adequate medical attention that Malaysia had decided to privatise certain social amenities.

Referring to advances in medical technology, Dr Mahathir said: "Even more dramatic advances lie ahead of us."

"But the question that has to be asked is whether we can afford the cost of modern medical technology.

"Even in rich countries like the United States, soaring health costs have become a burden.

"Nearly two-thirds of health insurance costs in the United States are spent in maintaining the

last two years or a person's life.

"That does not seem to me an efficient way to spend health funds."

He said Malaysia, though only a developing country, still wanted the best of modern medicine.

"But our resources are limited and, whether we like it or not, we will lag behind in the provision of some of the most sophisticated facilities."

He said these were facts that had to be faced by the Government and the people.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's medical problems were compounded by the inheritance of a colonial system whereby the British Government, faced with the problem of providing medical care for British expatriate officers here, deduced to set

up Government hospitals to provide free treatment.

Free treatment was also provided for anyone willing to be attended by doctors to encourage locals to switch to Western medicine.

If there was any charge, it was nominal.

"The free hospitals became very popular and evolved into a part of the Government service."

The Prime Minister said free medical treatment had now become a heavy burden despite nominal charges and the trend was for the burden to become heavier.

He said the problem was not that of the Government alone but that of the nation as a whole, since Malaysians pay for the treatment indirectly.

"The question they should ask themselves is whether their money is being spent on the right

people the deserving poor."

He apologised for having to focus on what seemed to be a local issue at an international con-

ference. "But while you discuss enthusiastically the technical advances in medicine and surgery, you should also spare a thought for the rapid escalation in costs.

"When you become cost conscious, then the technology of cost cutting will receive serious attention."

He referred to "mass surgery" where a senior surgeon moves from the theatre to theatre performing only the most sophisticated part of the surgery while assistants start the operation and close up the patient as helping to reduce costs.

However, if carried too far then there was the possibility that hospitals would become mere "repair shops".

"So no matter how advanced medical technology becomes, there must be a certain degree of personal relationship between the patient and the doctor, if medicine is to remain meaningful."

Dr Mahathir said there might be other ways to cut costs if doctors appreciated that cutting costs was important, since the high cost of medicine deprived the poor of adequate medical attention.

He called on the various colleges of the profession to work together as medical disciplines were not only related but actually overlapped each other.