

KUALA LUMPUR, DEC 6 (BERNAMA) -- PRIME MINISTER DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD TODAY TICKED OFF THE PRIVATE MEDICAL SERVICE FOR WHAT HE DESCRIBED AS OVER-CONCENTRATION ON THE RICH AND SAID THE TREND CAN WORSEN THE DISPARITY IN MEDICAL CARE BETWEEN THE RURAL AND URBAN PEOPLE.

HE SAID THE PRIVATE MEDICAL SERVICE WAS NOT GIVING SUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO THE LOWER INCOME GROUP AND ADVISED IT AGAINST BEING MOTIVATED EXCLUSIVELY BY PROFIT.

OPENING A ONE-DAY SYMPOSIUM ON HEALTH CARE HERE, DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR DESCRIBED AS UNPRECEDENTED THE RAPID GROWTH OF THE PRIVATE MEDICAL SERVICE IN THE KLANG VALLEY AND IN SOME OF THE MAJOR TOWNS IN THE COUNTRY.

HE SAID THE FACILITIES RANGED FROM SINGLE PRACTICE AND SMALL MATERNITY HOMES TO HOSPITALS OF A FEW HUNDRED BEDS.

THE LOCATION OF THESE FACILITIES, HE SAID, WAS OBVIOUSLY INFLUENCED BY THE PULL OF THE MARKET FORCES -- CLIENTS WHO COULD AFFORD TO PAY FOR THE SERVICES.

+WHILE WELCOMING THIS DEVELOPMENT BECAUSE IT SUPPLEMENTS EFFORTS IN PROVIDING MEDICAL SERVICE TO THE MORE WELL-TO-DO URBAN POPULATION, THE GOVERNMENT IS ACUTELY AWARE THAT IT CAN FURTHER WORSEN THE CURRENT DISPARITY IN MEDICAL CARE BETWEEN THE RURAL AND URBAN POPULATIONS.

+SUCH DEVELOPMENT IS CLEARLY UNDESIRABLE, HE SAID.

DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR STRESSED THAT EVERY INDUSTRY HAD A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, MORE SO THE HEALTH INDUSTRY, AND IT SHOULD THEREFORE NOT BE MOTIVATED EXCLUSIVELY BY PROFIT.

+AFTER ALL, IT IS SOCIETY WHICH HAS GRANTED MORE OR LESS MONOPOLISTIC RIGHTS TO THE MEDICAL PROFESSION TO PRACTISE THE OCCUPATION, AND IT IS PUBLIC FUNDS WHICH SUPPORT MEDICAL EDUCATION, HE SAID.

THE PRIME MINISTER SAID IT WAS THEREFORE NATURAL THAT IN RETURN THE PUBLIC EXPECTED REASONABLE ACCESSIBILITY TO MEDICAL CARE AND THAT THE PEOPLE WERE NOT DENIED MEDICAL CARE BY HIGH FEES, UNDUE CONCENTRATION OF FACILITIES IN HIGH-INCOME AREAS OR ANY OTHER FORM OF BARRIER.

DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR SAID THE GOVERNMENT WOULD CONTINUE TO PROVIDE A FULLY OR PARTIALLY SUBSIDISED MEDICAL SERVICE, TO THE EXTENT OF THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC CAPABILITY.

HE SAID PEOPLE IN THE HIGHER INCOME BRACKETS SHOULD PAY FOR THEIR TREATMENT THEREBY REDUCING THE BURDEN THE GOVERNMENT HAD TO BEAR IN PROVIDING HEALTH CARE.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR, HE SAID, COULD FURTHER HELP IN THIS COST-SHARING BY KEEPING ITS FEES AS LOW AS REASONABLY POSSIBLE, BY CROSS-SUBSIDY AND BY OPENING CLINICS AND HOSPITALS IN AREAS WHICH WERE RELATIVELY UNDER-SERVED.

THIS WOULD MAKE THE SERVICE OFFERED BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR ACCESSIBLE TO A GREATER NUMBER OF PEOPLE, INCLUDING THOSE WHO WOULD OTHERWISE FLOCK TO THE ALREADY CONGESTED GOVERNMENT FACILITIES, HE ADDED.

THE PRIME MINISTER SAID THAT TO MEET THE DEMANDS OF THE COMMUNITY EFFECTIVELY, A PRIVATE HOSPITAL HAD TO OFFER A MINIMUM RANGE OF SERVICES AND FACILITIES THAT WERE COMMONLY ASSOCIATED WITH A HOSPITAL.

HE SAID THAT, FOR INSTANCE, THE HOSPITAL SHOULD BE ABLE TO PROVIDE ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY SERVICES AT ALL TIMES.

NO ACCIDENT VICTIM SHOULD BE DENIED FIRST AID SIMPLY BECAUSE HE WAS NOT A REGULAR PATIENT OR COULD NOT PRODUCE THE REQUIRED SURETY, HE ADDED.

DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR SAID THE HEALTH MINISTRY WAS REVIEWING THE CURRENT LAWS RELATING TO THE REGISTRATION OF PRIVATE HOSPITALS TO ENSURE OPTIMUM MEDICAL CARE.

THE SYMPOSIUM IS ORGANISED BY A CONSTRUCTION FIRM, YEOHTIONG LAY-WILMA, WHICH IS ENGAGED IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE \$92.4 MILLION KUALA TRENGGANU GENERAL HOSPITAL ON A TURNKEY BASIS. -- BERNAMA