

PM: Private hospitals must demons

NST 2 1 MAY 1993

Service first,

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By Nuraina Samad

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad** said the medical profession should not be over-commercialised to the extent that fees imposed are so high that patients who cannot afford them are possibly turned away.

The service element must be emphasised. Although earnings were important private hospitals should also be considerate and demonstrate a strong sense of social responsibility, the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir said: "There is a place for private hospitals in Malaysia now and in the future but the commercial element must go hand in hand with social responsibility.

"Then and then only will private hospitals and private doctors be regarded with respect by the community and the nation."

He said this in his speech when opening the two-day National Health Care Conference, organised by the Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia (APHM) and co-sponsored by the Health Ministry, here.

While the Government welcomed the setting up of private hospitals which had helped to ease its responsibility in providing medical and health care for the people, there was nevertheless a negative aspect, he said.

There was a possibility of private doctors giving more priority to business and getting a lucrative income than providing a service in accordance with their Hippocratic Oath, Dr Mahathir added.

That was why the service element was very important, he said.

In this regard, he said, the practice of refusing an "emergency" patient who could not pay a deposit was not consistent with the medical profession.

"The least is to provide

emergency treatment. Although this will result in less revenue at the end of the month, it should be regarded as part of the costs. Today, the incomes of private medical practitioners and specialists are four or five times more than their counterparts in Government service.

"I believe a little reduction in earnings will not be a big problem. Moreover, it does not occur too often," he said, adding that such emergency cases for private hospitals should be seen as more of first-aid in nature.

Without doubt, private hospitals could help ease the Government's financial burden and the pressure of people seeking medical treatment. Today, those who could afford it, could obtain medical treatment from private hospitals without having to wait for their turn at Government hospitals, he said.

As society became more affluent, patients were willing to pay for treatment. Seen from one aspect, the high fees may deter the average wage earner, but had not affected the income of these hospitals. They had managed to provide sophisticated and up-to-date facilities, he added.

This meant that the quality of treatment had risen. Dr Mahathir hoped that the expertise of these private doctors would be comparable to that from other parts of the world so that it would encourage foreign patients to seek treatment in Malaysia.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia was fortunate not to have too many incidents of doctors being sued in courts due to negligence. Even when there were such cases, there were rules preventing payment of excessively high compensation.

Compensation should be

rate sense of social responsibility

doctors told

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Give your best, doctors told

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paid, but this must be reasonable, he said.

"The Government does not wish to see excessive litigation and demands. The medical service in countries where doctors are frequently punished by the courts to pay excessive compensation is very poor," he said.

Hospitals and doctors would sometimes make unnecessary medical examinations for fear of being blamed for negligence, which in turn would push up treatment costs higher.

Sometimes, the fees were pushed higher to help cover high insurance costs. Sometimes, doctors did not extend emergency treatment to avoid the possibility of being taken to court by the patient seeking compensation, he said.

Dr Mahathir said society would lose if the "litigation mentality" was widely adopted.

He added that doctors should not engage in "fee-splitting" and "ambulance chasing" and avoid any collaboration with lawyers "to get business".

In fact doctors could have a lucrative income without having to resort to such dubious practice and without having to turn their backs on their Hippocratic Oath.

Dr Mahathir said, nevertheless, doctors should not be negligent in their duties and were required to give the best service, regardless of whether or not their patients could afford the costs.

"Don't carry out examination using expensive and sophisticated equipment purely to increase earnings or to avoid being sued in court for negligence," he said.

Dr Mahathir also spoke on the need to allow foreign doctors to work in Government or private hospitals if the number of doctors in the country did not increase in order to provide the desired health service for the people.

Earlier APHM president Datuk Sri Mahmood Merican, suggested in his speech that Government hospitals adopt more business-like ways and assume more responsibility for their financial viability.

He said Government hospitals were too charitable

and suggested that they be incorporated into one statutory body to overcome the problems they faced.

Dr Mahmood, noting that the Government was actively working out a National Health Plan and a new financing system, said among the ideals that needed to be addressed by both the Government and the private sector, were the need to restrain medical costs, the need to temper commercialisation with a social conscience and the need to ensure equitable access for the poor and the rural patient.

Also present at the opening were Health Minister Datuk Lee Kim Sai, Deputy Health Minister Datuk Farid Ariffin and Health Director-General Datuk Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman.

More than 200 people, including private doctors and those in public and private medical and health care, are participating in the conference.

An exhibition of the latest medical equipment and products is being held in conjunction with the conference.