

PM: Health care first priority

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By **Manan Osman and Chan Cheng Tuan**

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — Improving the health of the people in the rural areas and small towns has always been the Government's first priority, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Dr Mahathir said the Government had spent considerable sums of money yearly towards eradicating communicable and preventive diseases, adding that at present the Government spent RM3 billion on health care annually.

"The public's cry for more sophisticated diagnostic and treatment procedures will increase medical costs, especially for Malaysia which has a non-contributory free medical service for all.

"Even rich nations find that the Government itself cannot afford to pay the high costs of medical care.

"Without private medicine, a National Health Service is just impracticable," he said when opening the Ninth Biennial Scientific Meeting of the Asian-Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver at the Shangri-la hotel here.

Dr Mahathir said not long ago, diarrhoea, dysentery, maternal and neo-natal diseases and infections and infestations of the liver were the principal causes of death in the country, particularly in the rural areas.

However, with the im-

ly trained medical personnel to match the other developed countries in specialised medical care," he said.

He said although the long-term plan should be one of prevention of liver diseases, communicable diseases such as viral, bacterial and protozoal infections should be eradicated by an improved environment, providing good sanitation and good water supply, early and mandatory vaccination against viral diseases, health education, better nutrition and change in lifestyles.

Dr Mahathir said viral infections of the liver were still a major health problem in the Asia-Pacific region.

For instance, he said, the worldwide number of Hepatitis B carriers was estimated to be 280 million and 78 per cent of them were living in the Asia-Pacific region while Hepatitis B virus carriers accounted for between five and 20 per cent of the whole population in this area.

Dr Mahathir said the incidence of Hepatitis B carriers in Peninsular Malaysia was 3.5 per cent of the general population.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the incidence of liver cirrhosis and its complications including liver cancer was also high with a maximum of 150 cases in every 100,000 people.

Hepatitis B, he added, was detected in 50 to 80 per cent of these liver cancer patients and they were all Hepatitis B carriers.

provement in water supply, a cleaner environment and better health education provided by the Government, there had been a drastic decline in the bacterial, protozoal and other intestinal infections affecting the liver which plagued the country.

Dr Mahathir said statistics showed that cardiovascular diseases and trauma now ranked as the top causes of death in Malaysia while diarrhoea and dysentery had dropped to sixth place.

He added that diseases of the liver which were considered untreatable or with poor prognosis in the past had better survival rates now.

Dr Mahathir said while liver resection had been available in Malaysia since 1964, there was currently no liver transplantation programme in the country.

He said the Health Ministry had selected many young promising doctors to undergo specialised training overseas to meet this demand.

"The establishment of specialised transplantation units which perhaps will serve only 15 to 20 per cent of the liver patients, will place an additional burden on our economy.

"Nevertheless, as Malaysia moves to be a fully developed industrialised country by the year 2020, I am confident that we will not only have the resources but high-

Dr Mahathir said that in contrast, the incidence of liver cancer in North America and Europe was very low, with one to three cases in every 100,000 people while only three to five per cent of these patients were Hepatitis B carriers.

The incidence of traumatic injuries to the liver had been dramatically reduced due to the compulsory use of seat belts, he said.

He also said that every effort was being made to discourage young people from becoming addicted to drugs through education in schools, beginning with anti-smoking campaigns and parental supervision.

"It would seem that preventive measures are of vital importance in the education of all forms of hepatitis," he said.

Asked by reporters later on the possibility of setting up a national liver institute similar to the National Heart Institute (IJN), Dr Mahathir said it was possible but the Government's investment to set up IJN was big and there were other health-related priorities to consider.

He said it was difficult to decide because of limited funds, adding that perhaps one way was to look at privatisation for health care services in major towns.

Dr Mahathir later visited an exhibition in conjunction with the meeting.