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Dr M: Practise with empathy (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in urging private hospitals to charge Malaysians less for medical treatment, said they should practise their calling with great empathy for fellow citizens.

The Prime Minister said private hospitals should consider giving discounts to Malaysians, not only because their income had been reduced by 45 per cent due to the depreciation of the ringgit, but also because of the increasing pressure on government hospitals.

Speaking at the opening of the Gleneagles Intan Medical Centre in Jalan Ampang today, Dr Mahathir said private hospitals could impose higher charges on foreigners whose financial position had not been affected by the depreciation.

"At the Cabinet meeting today, the Health Minister (Datuk Chua Jui Meng) said pressure was mounting on government hospitals to accept more patients as they could not afford the charges of private hospitals," he said.

Dr Mahathir called on private hospitals to reduce costs. One way of doing this was by having medical practitioners and top executives take a salary cut.

He also suggested that the medical fees for those in the low-income bracket be reduced wherever possible.

Dr Mahathir added that if more people were to seek treatment at government hospitals, private medical centres stood to lose revenue.

He said if private hospitals did not get the patients, they would suffer.

"Therefore, private hospitals must make their facilities, services and charges more attractive," he said.

He added that the hospitals should also indirectly "export their services" by attracting foreigners.

"We will have no complaints if you charge foreigners more in ringgit, simply because it (the ringgit) is now cheaper.

"Therefore, if you had charged a foreigner RM250 before, today you can charge RM391 because that is the current exchange rate," he said, adding that these foreigners would not be paying more in US dollars.

Also present was his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali.

Gleneagles Intan Medical Centre was built at a cost of RM165 million and started operations in August last year.

It comprises a 330-bed tertiary-care hospital and a separate medical office building accommodating outpatient clinics of various specialties and sub-specialties.

The hospital is a joint venture between Tan & Tan Development Bhd, holding 30 per cent of the equity, Gleneagles (M) Sdn Bhd (30 per cent), Insas Bhd (20 per cent) and PNB Equity Resource Corporation Sdn Bhd (20 per cent).

Meanwhile, at a Press conference earlier, Chua said it would soon be an offence for private healthcare centres, including hospitals and clinics, to turn away emergency cases.

The Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Bill 1998, approved by the Cabinet last week and to be tabled in Parliament in March, will make it compulsory for these centres to provide emergency treatment to the best of their ability.

Chua said healthcare centres included hospitals, clinics, blood banks, ambulatory care centres, haemodialysis centres, hospices, psychiatric

hospitals and maternity centres.

"Rejecting emergency cases gives the medical profession a very bad name."

He cited the case of sales executive Yee Thean Long, 26, who was turned away from a Bangsar clinic when he could not pay a RM400 deposit.

The matter was highlighted by the Malay Mail in June last year.

Chua also said the Bill would provide for stringent penalties.

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