

08/09/1997

Drop in ringgit to 'affect health projects'

Ainon Mohd

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The Health Ministry has to delay many of its Seventh Malaysia Plan projects to help reduce the country's deficit caused by the depreciation of the ringgit.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said today the projects included 21 hospitals and many health centres throughout the country.

These projects, costing about RM2.6 billion, had been approved in line with the Government's aspiration to establish "modern paperless hospitals".

He was speaking after opening the inaugural World Symposium on Traditional Chinese Orthopaedic Medicine.

Chua said the projects were necessary to meet the growing demand for comprehensive in-patient and out-patient services.

"The delay only involves government-aided projects. Privatised ones are not affected."

"However, in view of the present currency market situation, we are prepared to make adjustments in the interest of the people," he added.

Chua said he could not specify projects which would be affected until his ministry had obtained details from the Federal Government, the Economic Planning Unit and the Treasury.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday that certain major projects, including the construction of hospitals, would be delayed following the depreciation of the ringgit.

Dr Mahathir said implementation of projects which had yet to be announced or formalised would be reviewed.

Chua said currently a few major hospital projects were being upgraded under the privatisation project. These projects would go on as planned as they did not involve government funds.

One of them, the Selayang Hospital, the country's first government-owned ultra-modern hospital, is expected to be ready in August next year.

Other projects are the Sungai Buloh Hospital Complex and the redevelopment of the Kuala Lumpur Hospital.

Chua said the privatisation project for the KLH had been awarded to Tunas Selatan, a consortium comprising Tunas Selatan Sdn Bhd, MBF Properties and Services, KL Medical Centre and Lankhorst Pancabumi Sdn Bhd.

The project is financed through the transfer of land worth RM827 million to the consortium for commercial development.

The transfer will involve 28.15 hectares of the present KLH site and 90.04 hectares of the Sungai Buloh hospital site.

"Since the allocation under the Seventh Malaysia Plan is to upgrade and provide quality medical facilities and services to the people, we hope the effects will be minimal on the health sector," he added.

In his speech, Chua said practitioners of traditional medicine and western-trained doctors had learnt a lot from one another.

In Malaysia, he said, Western medicine or allopathic medicine had been the mainstay of the healthcare system provided by the Government.

"There is no provision for traditional medicine service in the government hospitals or health clinics."

However, he said, various forms of traditional medicine still commanded a large following among Malaysians as the volume of traditional medicines in the country was about RM1 billion annually.

He said the ministry had set up three committees to study matters on alternative medicine, including traditional medicine.

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