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Training 'first responders' to provide emergency treatment

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Police, fire and other rescue personnel will be trained to assume the role of "first responder" and provide emergency care during accidents, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

They would be trained to perform initial assessment and basic life-support procedures in the event of an accident, he said.

Dr Mahathir said first responders were individuals who were not specifically trained in providing emergency care but who, by the nature of their occupations, were the first to arrive at the scene of the incident.

For example, policemen would be equipped with life support skills to save victims and initiate life support procedures, as well as the management of other aspects of an accident, he said when opening the first Asian International Congress on Emergency Medicine at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The three-day congress is organised by the Malaysian Society of Traumatology and Emergency Medicine. Held concurrently with the congress is the International Healthcare Show organised by ABC Exhibitions.

Also present at the opening were Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng and Malaysian Society of Traumatology and Emergency Medicine president Dr Abu Hassan Asaari Abdullah.

Dr Mahathir said the "first responder" concept was recognised internationally as a cost-efficient and effective part of an overall emergency medical system.

Besides this, he said, there was also a need for Malaysia to establish a comprehensive communication system with universal access line, like the '911' system in the United States, as part of its emergency medical system.

The system, which should be established as soon as possible, would provide public access to the healthcare service.

"Malaysia is now planning to establish an emergency communication network which will include telemedicine and tele-emergency capabilities," he said.

Dr Mahathir said a complete assessment of the patient condition had been made possible with advances in audio-visual technology.

"This is ideal for our situation where we do not have adequate specialist service in every part of the country," he said. "Hence, telemedicine will enable access to expert consultation."

Dr Mahathir said the Government was moving quickly, especially in emergency medical services and trauma care, as Malaysia moved towards full industrialisation.

He said Malaysia's epidemiological profile now resembled much more closely that of an industrialised country with cardiovascular disease, cancer and injury representing the major killers.

"Furthermore, the incidence of injury due to road traffic and industrial accidents is fast accelerating," he said. "It equals, if not exceeds, that of western countries due to the faster rate of development."

Dr Mahathir said the high number of deaths due to accidents in Malaysia was expected to increase to 31.2 per 100,000 population.

This was consistent with the increase in the number of registered vehicles, of which motorcycles made up 58 per cent.

Dr Mahathir said the rise in fatalities was higher during periods of

heavy population movement like the recent Chinese New Year and Hari Raya holidays.

During the 18-day Kongs Raya celebrations, 614 people lost their lives, 565 sustained serious injuries and 892 minor injuries.

"In economic terms, this clearly represents a significant loss to the country," he said. "A large proportion of casualties are in the 20 to 40 age group."

In 1993, there were 27.8 deaths per 100,000 population, with some 130,000 years of life lost.

"Urgent action is required both in terms of injury control and prevention," he said, "as well as in the development of emergency medical and trauma care.

Meanwhile, Dr Abu Hassan said trained operators would man the `911' emergency call service due to start early next year in the Klang Valley.

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