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Doctors needed badly (HL)

Sharanjit Singh

BUKIT KAYU HITAM, Fri. - The shortage of doctors in government hospitals and clinics has reached a critical stage, prompting the Health Ministry to plan a recruitment drive in several countries to fill the vacancies.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said these recruitment campaigns to woo foreign doctors would be held in Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

He said priority would be given to doctors from Indonesia who would find it easier to work in Malaysia because of the cultural and language similarities.

A Health Ministry team would be leaving for Indonesia soon to do the recruiting.

Chua said there was an immediate shortage of about 700 doctors nationwide and there was a need to fill the vacancies fast.

"We are faced with a fairly critical situation ... We need to hire 50 to 100 foreign doctors fast," he added.

He was speaking to reporters after the official opening of the Laka Temin health clinic near here. The ceremony was officiated by Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, wife of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Asked if the ministry anticipated problems in attracting foreign doctors to work in Malaysia, Chua said: "It is not easy but we will try ... the problem is the exchange rate.

"They (foreign doctors) may be reluctant because of the current exchange rate of the ringgit to the US dollar."

Chua said the shortage of doctors was especially felt in Sabah, Sarawak and Johor. He said the ministry could only fill 55 per cent of medical officers' posts in the interior areas compared with 83 per cent in urban areas.

"This is because not many doctors are keen to work in rural areas or in Sabah and Sarawak.

"This is despite the incentives offered to them. However, we will continue to work towards solving this problem," he said.

The ministry, Chua added, planned to discuss with the Malaysian Medical Association to work out a possible solution. This may include getting doctors in the private sector to work, on a contract or volunteer basis, in hospitals and health clinics in rural areas.

In February, Deputy Health Minister Datuk Suleiman Mohamed was reported to have said that the ministry had employed on contract basis 329 foreign doctors.

He said this was done especially to meet demand for medical officers in Sabah, Sarawak and the interior areas. The present doctor:patient ratio is about 1:2,800 while the standard for a developed nation should be 1:650.

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