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The right to medical care

DOCTORS, nurses and other health and medical workers have always been held in high esteem as they save lives and alleviate the pain and suffering of the sick. In keeping with the high standards of the profession, they must be imbued with compassion and a high sense of duty.

The sick, whether they can afford it or not, have a right to medical and health care. Unfortunately, in an environment of changing values and priorities, the industry's code of ethics and responsibility are sometimes sacrificed on the altar of the mighty ringgit. In some instances, they are dumped to safeguard and preserve the self-interests of health care providers.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for equitable and easy access to medical and health services for all is a timely reminder. Changes in lifestyle and the escalating cost of medical treatment makes it incumbent upon hospitals, both public and private, to ensure that the sick get the services they need.

People needing medical assistance cannot be refused treatment or admission to hospital for whatever reason. Reports of such incidents, albeit isolated in nature, are beyond comprehension. Expressing concern recently about the case of a patient allegedly refused treatment at a private and a government hospital, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said hospitals cannot turn away patients because they do not want to risk being blamed should the treatment go wrong. This breach of the Hippocratic Oath can only cause consternation among the public. Unless action is taken quickly to check such an irresponsible practice, it will become the norm.

Hospitals that admit patients on a selective basis are not true to the calling of the profession. There is always an element of risk in any endeavour but if healthcare personnel exercise due care in the best interest of the patient, they would have done a professional job and should have no worry about any breach. In the case of a private hospital, it is accepted that being a corporate entity, it has shareholders to answer to. But if material gains and fear of litigation are its main considerations, then it is truly in the wrong business. Healthcare should not be the exclusive domain of a privileged few and as Dr Mahathir has reminded, excessive pre-occupation with individualistic care might distort beyond proportion the interests of the community.

The advance of technology and new modalities have brought about new dimensions in the provision and perspective of oral and general health. Dentistry, too, has paralleled medicine in the forefront of the modern health profession. It has shifted its focus from the mere concern of healthy teeth and gums to the broader perspective of oral health. Through the years, Malaysia has made its mark in health care and won the bid to host the FDI Annual Dental Congress 2001 which is now going on in Kuala Lumpur.

As the nation marches on in its endeavour to achieve developed nation status, the private sector must fulfil its role and responsibility in the implementation of the country's medical and health programmes. Although the Government provides a sizeable budget for healthcare yearly, there is only so much that it can do. Private hospitals and clinics must continue to exercise their conscionable duty in this realm to ensure the credibility of the profession is strengthened.

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