

National health insurance scheme in the offing

STAR 1 2 OCT 2002

KUALA LUMPUR: A national health insurance scheme for all Malaysians which will ease the financial burden on the Government is in the offing.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the cost of providing free or minimal cost medical treatment was becoming too much for the Government to bear.

"We do not want to burden the people but the Government has a limit to what it can spend.

"We have already increased the allocation to the Health Ministry by 20% in the Budget. It is the biggest ever allocation (to the ministry) but it is still not enough," he said after launching the national-level World Vision Day here.

Dr Mahathir said having the scheme was inevitable because the price of medicine and the cost of treatment have increased drastically over the years.

He said there was a time when a bottle of cough medicine cost one sen.

"Nowadays, we have to give a lot of antibiotics, some of them cost as much as RM5 per capsule," he added.

The idea of a scheme was floated in 1997. It, however, provoked strong opposition from the people and was put on the back burner following the economic crisis that year.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Finance Minister, said it was not fair for those who could afford it to seek treatment at Government hospitals.

For example, he said, factory owners were sending their workers to Government hospitals to seek medical treatment

because it was free.

He said civil servants would, however, continue to receive free medical treatment at Government hospitals because it had been their right

all along.

Asked which country the Government was looking at as a model for the scheme, Dr Mahathir said it would not be the British model because it

was contradictory.

Earlier, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said studies showed that three out of every 1,000 Malaysians were blind.

He said most of the blindness could be prevented or controlled, adding that modern technology had allowed some cases of blindness to be cured through surgery.