

09/09/2002

`Pity the poor' call to private hospitals

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tonight called on private hospitals and medical centres in the country to reduce their charges and be "reasonable", especially in cases involving the poor.

He said specialist doctors at private hospitals should also opt to forgo their profit or "specialist fees" if the need arose as this was a form of contribution to the nation.

"Sometimes we ask ourselves who gets the money (from the high charges imposed in private hospitals). Is it the hospital that is making too much profit, or is the specialist's fee too high?

"Or is the cost of the medicine and cost of operation very high "If (the charges are) high, then private hospitals must reduce, maybe forgo all fees and also forgo whatever profits that they derive from the operations because these are poor people that we are dealing with. If they are rich, it is okay."

Speaking at the 10th Anniversary Dinner of the National Heart Institute (IJN) at the Putra World Trade Centre here, Dr Mahathir said the recent death of 15 month-old Sofea Qhairunissa Ali was a tragedy which could have been avoided.

"I am not blaming the hospitals, they (Sofea's parents) were not very confident of government hospitals and doctors, so they went to the private hospital but they lacked funds.

Unfortunately before the necessary funds could be collected, Sofea died.

"This is a tragedy which should not have taken place. If from the early stages they had chosen the government hospital, it might have been different."

Pointing that the high cost that needed to be borne by patients to undergo operation in private hospitals had prompted some of them to seek donations from the public, Dr Mahathir said private hospitals and specialists could also "donate" to these people by reducing or cancelling fees.

"Even specialists can forgo some of the fees that they would normally collect. I'm quite sure they are as caring as anybody else," he said.

Sofea's death has saddened the nation and generated much debate regarding, among other things, the cost of healthcare in private hospitals.

The basis for the public outcry is the purported delay in performing the liver transplant at a private hospital, resulting in Sofea's death.

Two reasons were put forward for the delay.

The hospital authorities maintained that it was not due to cost considerations but to ensure that Sofea was in a more stable condition before proceeding with the operation.

The community, on the other hand, felt that it was a question of insufficient funds, thereby painting the private hospital in bad light.

On the case of TV personality Ras Adiba Radzi who secured more than RM300,000 in public donations for her spine operation in Australia, Dr Mahathir said he had visited Ras Adiba here and felt that the best option was for her to travel to Australia.

"I hope the people would not continue to pose all kinds of questions about her, or the funds.

"It is the people who gave her the money and I'm sure she will contribute any remaining amount to those who are in need," he said.

In his lengthy speech, Dr Mahathir praised the IJN for its exemplary service to Malaysians who suffered heartrelated diseases.

"I have great faith in Malaysian doctors and I think that faith is justified by me standing here and talking to you. As you know, I was cut open in 1989 and I'm still surviving."

Also present were Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng and IJN chairman Tan Sri Mohamed Khatib Abdul Hamid.