

12/10/2002

`Need for national health insurance plan'

Ramlan Said; Shamini Sarshni

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - A national health insurance scheme is needed because the Government will not be able to continue providing funds for the escalating cost of health care, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the Government did not want to burden the people but there was a limit to what it could do. "We have increased next year's allocation for the Health Ministry by 20 per cent, the biggest so far, but often this is still not enough, so we need to have some kind of health insurance."

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference after launching the World Sight Day 2002 at the Kuala Lumpur City Centre. Present was Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng.

The Prime Minister said the Government was studying health insurance schemes used by other countries, but he said the British model would not be considered as people there were required to make statutory contributions. "We are still studying the matter ... the Health Ministry will brief me on it."

On whether the scheme would also include civil servants, he said Government employees had enjoyed free treatment at Government hospitals.

The service was extended to non-civil servants but the Government found the cost prohibitive.

"During the British occupation, medicine like cough syrup cost one sen per bottle, and the people brought their own bottles, so it could be given free.

"Now, besides the cough syrup, they are given antibiotics and other pills costing RM5, RM10 each ... we do not have the capability to provide them for free anymore."

He assured the people that free treatment would continue at Government hospitals.

However, he said those who could afford it should not burden Government hospitals. Sometimes, he said, factories directed their workers to Government hospitals for free treatment when they should be paying for it.

In his speech, he said greater awareness must be created on the importance of caring for the eyes and the treatment available.

With modern technology and advancement in the field, he said some people with eyesight problems could be treated.

"Besides the Government, non-governmental organisations must play their role as some of these visual impairment conditions can be prevented if corrective measures are taken earlier.

"God willing, with co-operation from all quarters, we can reduce the number of visually-impaired people in Malaysia."

He said the Government was concerned and sensitive to the needs of the handicapped, including the blind.

World Sight Day is an annual event organised by the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness and co-sponsored by the World Health Organisation. The event has been acknowledged in Malaysia since 1999 and carries the theme "Vision 2020: The Right to Sight".

It focuses on the problem of global blindness and aims to raise awareness that 80 per cent of blindness can be treated or cured. The cost of global blindness is estimated at RM95 million every year.

A study conducted in Malaysia in 1996 showed 54,000 people were blind in both eyes and another 460,000 had visual problems.

