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Allowance for SARS medical staff soon

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Doctors and medical workers who risked their lives treating Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome patients will soon receive their critical allowance of RM200 to RM400 per month, backdated to April 1.

The 5,601 medical personnel stand to gain from the RM4 million allocated from the RM7.3 billion stimulus package announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in May.

Doctors will be paid RM400 while nurses, attendants and health officers will get RM200 a month.

Health Ministry secretary-general Datuk Alias Ali said they submitted the proposal to the Treasury last week and the money would be paid out as soon as approval was received.

Speaking to reporters after chairing the weekly Technical Committee Meeting on SARS at the ministry, he said the money would be given to 21 SARS designated hospitals, State health departments and the ministry for distribution.

Those benefiting worked in SARS isolation wards in the designated hospitals, laboratories, entry points (airports and ports), the Malaysia-Singapore Second Link and Causeway, SARS operations room in the ministry, and health officers in States who helped track down people who came in contact with probable SARS victims. Malaysia recorded five probable SARS cases with two deaths.

The Global Alert on SARS was announced by the World Health Organisation on March 12 and Malaysia immediately mobilised its SARS operations room followed by the setting up of SARS designated hospitals, National Committee on SARS Control and SARS designated gates at entry points in airports, ports and causeway.

At present, all the SARS isolation wards are empty.

Besides reducing the number of SARS isolation wards nationwide, Alias said, the staff had also been re-deployed to other jobs, although they have been told to be on standby in case of a re-emergence of the deadly disease.

"If the SARS Global alert is lifted, as expected on July 2, then everything would revert to normal," said Alias, adding SARS isolation wards would be closed and used as normal wards and screening at entry points would cease.

As for the Malaysia-Singapore Cross-Border Health Committee meeting to be held on July 11 here, Alias said it would go on as scheduled but their concentration would be on preparations for future challenges posed by the emergence and re-emergence of old and new viruses.

He said Asean+3 Project on "strengthening laboratory surveillance capacity and quality assurance for disease surveillance" would be held in Penang from July 7 to 9. If the SARS alert was lifted, a final meeting of the national committee might be convened.

Hong Kong and China, the worst affected, got the allclear from WHO this month. Taiwan and Toronto, Canada, are expected to follow soon.