

14/02/2003

Dr M: Too little spent on cures

Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today criticised the global trend of excessive military spending at the expense of better research into curing diseases.

Speaking at the opening of the Asian Society for Cardiovascular Surgery's 11th annual meeting, he also hit out at research funding which poured more money into new drugs that only the rich could afford.

"We shall not wipe out AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria or other infectious diseases that plague the developing world because too little money is being spent to cure or prevent these diseases.

"These diseases are of the poor who will not be able to pay for the cost of research through high prices. But research on impotency and its cure promises more returns.

"Vast amounts are dedicated to the problems of the rich who are the people keen on restoring their virility. The poor are resigned to eventually lose their drive and to fade away," he said in his keynote address at the conference. He said despite mankind's advancements in science and technology, medicines were still not available to all groups of people because of the high cost.

On government hospitals, Dr Mahathir noted that several ultra-modern ones were being built but the Government faced problems in finding surgeons and staff.

The difficulty lay in the high salaries offered by the private sector, which the Government knew it could never match, he said.

"Should the Government increase the pay, the private sector can more than match it. That is the dilemma of the Government. I see no end to the dilemma because the more doctors that we produce and train, the bigger is the demand for their services as the standard of living rises."

Dr Mahathir, who underwent coronary bypass surgery in 1989, also urged conference delegates to practise the "human touch" in dealing with their patients.

On Malaysia's advancements in cardiac surgery, Dr Mahathir said the country had been successful in using the most up-to-date methods and technology, especially at the National Heart Institute (IJN).

The IJN conducts about 2,500 heart surgeries yearly, out of the 4,000 such operations in the country. Since operating in 1992, it has quickly adopted many new techniques previously only available in the West.

IJN consultant cardiothoracic surgeon Datuk Dr Mohd Azhari Yakub, who is also the conference organising chairman, said the Government had been very supportive in adopting new medical technology.

"The Government has never made cost a primary factor when they allow the introduction of new technology here. This is in contrast with some countries where medical progress is hampered by a lack of funds," he told reporters at a Press briefing later.

While the cost of new technologies would be passed on to the patient, he said these would be off-set by shorter recovery periods and lesser time spent in hospital.

Dr Azhari also said it was up to the Government to find a solution on how best to retain its doctors.

The week-long conference is organised by the Malaysia Association of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery and is attended by 750 delegates from 26 countries.

