

Sabah hospitals in critical state as pandemic surges, non-Covid-19 patients affected

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COVID-19 | A surge in Covid-19 cases in Sabah has put a massive strain on public hospitals, with many struggling to find beds for critical patients, and health workers to look after them.

According to well-placed sources in the state's public health system, patients not infected with Covid-19 are also affected by the rise in cases, which reportedly cost lives.

One source claimed that at a public hospital in one Sabah red zone, at least five patients who did not have Covid-19 died recently, partly due to lack of hospital beds.

"These are deaths that don't make it into the news... deaths that are not captured in the data which occurred due to Covid-19 becoming rampant," the medical frontliner said.

Like all civil servants, Health Ministry staff are barred from speaking to the media without authorisation, and sources could only speak to Malaysiakini on condition of anonymity.

Non-Covid-19 patients are being transferred from Covid-19 designated hospitals to other public hospitals, filling up both regular and intensive care wards and delaying other treatments.

Another medical frontliner said at the hospital he works at, regular wards are also filling up creating a congestion in the system.

This means patients can't be transferred to regular wards from the intensive care unit (ICU) once they improve, to make way for more critical patients, the frontliner said.

The ICU in the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, Kota Kinabalu is among those crippled, after more than half of its nurses were placed under quarantine following one testing positive for Covid-19.

Health Minister Dr Adham Baba has said that more health workers are being mobilised to shore up the strained workforce.

The source said that regular wards are also being converted into ICUs with ventilators to cope with the rise in critical patients.

The Tawau Hospital, which has been taking in Covid-19 patients from Semporna and Lahad Datu, is also reportedly stretched extremely thin.

A source said instead of there being one nurse to one critical patient as is the usual practice, nurses there now reportedly have to look after six patients.

The situation is such in Tawau that the armed forces are setting up a field hospital for non-Covid-19 cases.

Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob announced that the field hospital will have 100 beds, various wards, eight medical officers, and 54 officers of various ranks including a commander, five medical experts, three medical officers, and other staff.

He said the air force will also have daily flights to Sabah to help the Health Ministry with logistics such as shuttling medical workers, and bringing swab test samples from Sabah to labs in the peninsula.

"The problem is manpower. The patients here are very sick so we can't care for

them without enough competent manpower," a source said.

Over in Beluran, the local public hospital is building makeshift isolation rooms in anticipation of having to treat Covid-19 patients.

NGO Beluran Hope founder Lina Ramsah, who is assisting in the construction of the isolation rooms, said that Covid-19 patients in the district had previously been sent to the Sandakan Hospital.

"But now, the Sandakan Hospital is also overcrowded, that they need to set up a hall for isolation.

"So our (local) Health Ministry staff need to be ready in case the Sandakan Hospital can't accept (Covid-19) patients from other places like Beluran," she told Malaysiakini.

However, efforts to build the isolation rooms have been made difficult by the district lockdown.

Lina said that there are not many shops where they can get materials in Beluran. The nearest city, Sandakan - has been placed under lockdown.

A good samaritan has contributed digital thermometers with stands and portable blood pressure machines for the isolation rooms.

Health Ministry seeks volunteers

Responding in his daily press briefing this evening, Health director-general Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said the ministry has mobilised staff for Tawau, Lahad Datu, Semporna and Kota Kinabalu to assist with Covid-19 cases there.

Since Oct 8, a total of 475 healthcare workers and public health officials have been sent to those districts.

"A review of human resources will be done on an ongoing basis to help curb the spread of Covid-19 infection in Sabah and public healthcare in general," he said while expressing gratitude to the frontliners on the ground.

He also urged for more volunteers to come forward to assist the ministry in this third wave of infections, by emailing the National Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) at mobilisasi19@gmail.com and cprc@moh.gov.my.

Meanwhile, Noor Hisham said the Tawau field hospital run by the armed forces would provide obstetrics and gynaecology services, paediatrics and general

surgery for non-Covid patients.

This is to allow the Tawau Hospital to care for patients who need intensive care, including those referred from nearby Semporna.

Covid-19 patients who are asymptomatic or with light symptoms will be placed in the quarantine and low-risk treatment centre (PKRC).

"The ministry is still discussing whether to place this field hospital at the Tawau Sports Complex. Based on early discussions we believe this field hospital can provide 100 beds.

"More information will be provided when it is finalised," he said.

Sabah recorded 255 new cases today, making up 74 percent of all cases in Malaysia.

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