

LETTER | Private healthcare in Malaysia: Millstone or milestone?

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LETTER | There are two documents that one should read for an objective appraisal of how and why Malaysia's privatisation of healthcare services in the country is increasingly being viewed as a misadventure.

One is to revisit former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad's working paper titled "Malaysia: The Way Forward" delivered on Feb 28, 1991, at the Malaysian Business Council.

The other is to read Anas Alam Faizli's well-summarised article "A barometer on Malaysia's healthcare system – are we doomed to fail?" published by Malaysiakini on Sept 23, 2016.

The above two papers will be necessary to further comprehend the latest and widely talked about legal suit of RM45 million being brought on by a Malaysian lawyer on three hospitals and eight doctors (FMT, April 7, 2021 – 3 hospitals, 8

doctors face RM45m suit over wrong cancer diagnosis).

Has the privatisation of healthcare in the country turned out to be a millstone for our health and well being or will it be a milestone of success for the 32 million citizens?

Was the road taken by the government to privatise healthcare a right turn?

Or did the private healthcare businesses relegate social responsibility in their vital quest for profits and returns on investment in order to remain a viable venture?

A shrewd business investor would have felt his/her adrenalin rush at horsepower speed as he/she heard Mahathir present his 91 paragraphs of "The Way Forward" at the Malaysian Business Council then.

Likewise, the public would have fired up their hopes, sky-high, on hearing the promises of salvation from a privatisation agenda that was encapsulated in the nine challenges of Mahathir's Vision 2020.

It set the ball rolling as all things and every service took the high road to privatisation including healthcare.

And 25 years later, as we pour through Anas' critical dissection of the anatomy of the privatisation agenda that knitted private healthcare in Malaysia, we can only weep.

Relying on my own experience of over five years in the private healthcare sector including a stint in Houston, Texas, and having trained thousands of nurses in Malaysia and Brunei, and medical specialists in Khartoum, Sudan, I cannot dismiss the fact that private healthcare which was crafted to be a milestone is turning into a millstone not only in Malaysia but even in the developed world, especially the US.

Hence the ongoing legal suit which is gaining much traction in the public foyer could become the true yardstick of measuring where and how our healthcare agenda has gone grossly wrong.

Perhaps this Covid-19 pandemic is an opportune time for serious examination of our healthcare sector.

The statistics presented by Anas tell a true picture of the looming crisis awaiting the wellbeing of all Malaysians in the not too distant future.

With a deeply imbalanced private versus public healthcare and all its related

ancillary and support services including the pharmaceutical sector, indeed our political masters have more than just battling among themselves to worry about.

The acute shortage of medical, nursing and medical technology specialists in a country that is fast heading to be an ageing population very soon, and plundered too by head hunters with a barrage of attractive terms of engagement/employment with the private healthcare sector, wonder what it would come down to for a population that is fast ballooning in its B40 population category.

With far more private hospitals than public facilities, where will even the M40 category of the population turn to as medical insurances will increasingly not provide the cover needed or the premiums may be beyond the reach of citizens?

Indeed, the millstones may only get heavier, fast fading any milestone like quality and speed and efficiency that the private healthcare parades in its brochures.

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