

PM: Health sector woes can be resolved in 3 years

Dewan Negara told that government will need more than a year to deal with issues plaguing profession

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PETALING JAYA: Rumours of a strike and resignations by contract doctors next month have been making rounds on social media and this has attracted the attention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the Health Ministry and Malaysian Medical Association (MMA).

Anwar assured contract doctors that 1,500 of them will be made permanent this year and the government will need three years to resolve the problems they faced.

He told the Dewan Negara on Wednesday the problem of permanent placement had been around for a long time and the current government could not resolve it within a year.

"If we were to give all 4,000 (contract doctors) a permanent placement as demanded, we will need more than RM10 billion a year. So, this is impossible.

"(I assure you), there will be 1,500 permanent placements this year, next year and the year after, let's say in three years'

time, we can resolve this (issue)," he said when presenting the supply bill for its second reading.

Meanwhile, MMA president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai urged the government to look into issues facing contract doctors.

He said the government should view the planned strike as a wake-up call and it should not come as a surprise to the government as the frustration felt by these doctors has gone way past their limit.

"MMA does not condone a strike as a means to get the government to address the issues. However, we understand (why doctors have decided to take) this route.

"Past governments have not been able to address the issue of contract doctors and they feel they are getting nowhere.

"It is hard for them to go about their duties with this feeling of uncertainty.

"MMA has fought hard for (the) issue to be resolved and the progress has been unsatisfactory."

He said the issue of permanent positions has dragged on for years, where there are not enough permanent positions and contract doctors are overworked and underpaid.

"And yet these doctors are expected to carry out their duties as a 'service for the nation.' It is totally unfair and many feel they are being taken advantage of.

"The 1,500 positions announced in Budget 2023 is not much different from the 1,500 permanent positions promised every year during the previous health minister's term."

Muruga Raj urged contract doctors not to proceed with the strike as it could affect patient care at public healthcare facilities and cause colleagues to take on additional responsibilities at the country's already overcrowded public healthcare facilities.

Muruga Raj said the issue of contract doctors is inherited and is a result of failed policies of the past.

The Health Ministry and the government must take full responsibility for any outcome

in the event of a strike.

A group has threatened mass resignations and a nationwide strike next month that could involve some 8,000 contract doctors.

An account known as "Mogok Doktor Malaysia" (Malaysian Doctors on Strike) has since emerged on social media.

The organisers have asked those on strike to take emergency or medical leave from April 3 to April 5 as a sign of protest, adding that it does not encourage demonstrations and flashmobs. They also threatened mass resignations on April 1.

A spokesman for the group said an estimated 8,000 contract medical officers (MO) out of some 20,000 will participate in this mass resignation and strike.

He added that 3,000 contract MO will resign on April 1, while the rest will not be present for work from April 3 to April 5.

The group's demands include the absorption of all contract MO into permanent positions without any conditions or interviews, a basic salary and on-call rate hike and a resolution for the shortage of specialists, MO and house officers.

Health Ministry Director-General Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said on Wednesday that a strike was not the best solution and implored aggrieved parties to reconsider the strike as healthcare is a critical service.

He said healthcare service must continue to be regarded as a critical sector due to the complexity, challenges and risks healthcare workers face in carrying out their duties and responsibilities.

"Covid-19 has taught us that without a resilient healthcare system, the country might not have been able to control the pandemic and people would not have been able to carry on with their lives.

"Healthcare workers, who are the main assets of healthcare services, need to continue to be given due attention, including appropriate remuneration for their services."