

Zooming in on surgeon shortage

PM: Cabinet to discuss training and accreditation for cardiothoracic specialists

By **TARENCE TAN** and
RAGANANTHINI VETHASALAM
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: Recent issues concerning training and accreditation for heart and lung surgeons, a critical profession that is lacking in Malaysia, will be discussed at the Cabinet meeting.

"It will be discussed this Wednesday during the Cabinet meeting," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim told reporters briefly when asked about the controversy surrounding the training of cardiothoracic surgeons.

In an immediate reaction, Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy chief executive officer Azrul Mohd Khalib said in a post on X that the Cabinet should not discuss the matter without the presence of Health Minister Datuk

Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad, who is attending the World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland.

"I don't think it would be a good idea for this issue to be discussed and decided upon by the Cabinet without the benefit and counsel of the Health Minister," he said.

"It would be better to wait for the minister to return from Geneva. It is worth the wait."

Welcoming the announcement, Malaysian Association for Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery (MATCVS) honorary secretary Prof Dr John Chan Kok Meng hoped the Cabinet would support the Health Minister's initiatives to resolve the problem.

He said the minister had announced plans to amend the Medical Act at the next Parliament meeting to allow continued recognition of the parallel pathway

training programmes and strengthen the local University Master's training programmes.

Dr Chan said the Malaysian Medical Council's (MMC) decision to not recognise the cardiothoracic parallel pathway has severely affected the workforce planning for cardiothoracic services in the country.

"This decision was made without being considered by the Cardiothoracic Surgery Evaluation and Education committees in the MMC and is not based on the standards and the quality of the training or qualification," he said.

Hartal Doktor Kontrak spokesperson Dr Muhammad Yassin hoped that the parallel pathway programme would be recognised and cardiothoracic graduates would be able to work and practise in Malaysia as surgeons, thus

addressing the issue of the shortage of surgeons and increasing patient load.

In March, the Health Minister told the Dewan Rakyat that there were only 14 cardiothoracic surgeons working in the ministry.

The Star in March had reported that the shortage of cardiothoracic surgeons have left some 1,500 heart and lung disease patients in government hospitals in dire straits.

According to reports, Malaysia needs a ratio of one cardiothoracic surgeon to 500,000 individuals in 2025 and one to 450,000 in year 2030.

When it was proposed that Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) temporarily open up its cardiothoracic surgery master's programme, it drew a storm of protest from racial conservatives

including those from within the unity government alliance.

Critics of the proposal have been adamant that UiTM maintain its bumiputera-only admissions policy despite the fact that the university already accepts foreign students.

Another aspect of the controversy is that Malaysian graduates who had been sent by the government to study cardiothoracic surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh are unable to practise in Malaysia as their qualifications are not accepted by the MMC.

Four of these graduates have already sued the MMC for refusing to register them on the National Specialist Register (NSR) - the third known lawsuit against the MMC's rejection of NSR specialist registration applications.