

Strengthening Malaysia's Healthcare System: The Way Forward, Government Seeking Public Views

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PUTRAJAYA, March 4 (Bernama) -- Malaysia needs to review and transform its current healthcare system in order to provide more comprehensive high-quality care and make it accessible to all Malaysians, as the country moves to become a developed nation by 2020, said Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai.

"Healthcare transformation is needed, as the current healthcare system is facing a different set of challenges than what we had in the past, and it may not be good enough to take us into 2020," he said in an interview with Bernama.

He said that public expectation for higher quality health services is rising and the expectation will continue to rise as we become a developed nation. Besides that, the proportion of elderly is also increasing in the country.

"It is forecasted that by 2030, our population aged 60 years and above will be more than 15 percent of the total population, compared to the current six percent. The aged requires a lot more health care services and we must take care of their needs," he said.

Liow explained that there is also an increasing number of people suffering from non-communicable diseases (NCD) such as diabetes, hypertension and cancer, adding to Malaysia's disease burden of communicable diseases and vector-borne diseases such as dengue.

Liow pointed out that the recent National Health and Morbidity Survey in 2011 reported that the prevalence of diabetes is 15.2 percent, meaning 2.6 million of Malaysia's adult population aged 18 and above have diabetes. Diabetic prevalence in the country was only 11.6 percent in 2006. This is a 31 percent increase in just five years.

Another example is that the prevalence of hypertension which is 32.7 percent (5.8 million of the population) in 2011, an increase of 1.6 percent compared to 32.2 percent in 2006. The prevalence of obesity is 15.1 percent in 2011, or 2.5 million of the population, an increase of 7.9 percent when compared to the 14 percent prevalence in 2006.

"The number of Malaysians with undiagnosed NCD risk factors has increased alarmingly. For diabetes, there may be one undiagnosed patient for every patient diagnosed. For hypertension, for every two patients diagnosed, there may be another three still undiagnosed" he said.

Liow explained that under the World Trade Organisation agreements, we are required to liberalise our healthcare sector.

"Foreign doctors and foreign health care organisations can then come into our country freely. We can't stop them. Our doctors and hospitals in the private sector will have to face more competition" he added.

Therefore, Liow said, the country's healthcare system needs to be transformed in order to cope with all the challenges and meet the needs of a developed nation.

"In 1960s, '70s, '80, '90s, our healthcare system could be sustained. No doubt our system is good, but our current system is already under stress with all the challenges that have been mentioned. We cannot be complacent and wait until it is broken or collapsed before fixing it".

"Moreover, there are people who can't access affordable healthcare, despite the continuous effort by the government to upgrade its clinic and hospitals," he said, adding the current government budget for healthcare consumes about 2.71 percent of the GDP while people and companies are also already spending another 2.25 percent of GDP.

He stressed that the government will continue to increase the health budget in order to improve the public healthcare sector, but as the country moves toward becoming a developed nation, a more sustainable system is needed for the long term.

"Therefore, we are now looking at various modalities or models. We are not close-minded, we are not one-track minded, and we welcome input and feedback from all, " he said.

Liow said there are many misinformation being circulated about the proposal on 1Care for 1Malaysia.

The government has not decided anything yet and the discussion is still at the preliminary level.

He said that the Health Ministry will continue to engage the public on this health transformation.

"We are planning to organise an open-day soon, inviting the public to engage with the ministry to further discuss on how to strengthen the healthcare system in Malaysia.

"We want to hear their views on how we can strengthen the healthcare system and use them to input and deliberate as we develop the blueprint. After the blueprint is ready, we will engage the public again. It is not a done deal. It is totally wrong to say we have decided on 1Care," he added.

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