



# PROMISES, PROMISES

Health and education seem to have gotten less in the recently announced Ninth Malaysia Plan. Pity, as they are the two most fundamental needs of a nation in a bid to progress.

WHAT'S new for health under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP)? Let's take a look at some of the strategies outlined for the health sector in the plan. Among them:

- enhancing the healthcare delivery system to increase accessibility to quality care,
- enhancing research and development to support evidence-based decision-making, and
- the implementation of a health financing scheme.

Now, let's look back at some strategies stated in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2000-2005). They are:

- improving accessibility to affordable and quality healthcare,
- enhancing research capacity and the capability of the health sector, and
- developing and instituting a healthcare financing scheme.

Sounds familiar? Perhaps, the most obvious is the repeated promise of implementing a healthcare financing scheme.

But there is little reason to get excited, given that such a scheme has failed to take off in the last 20 years. Even Health Minister Datuk Chua Soi Lek admitted that to the Press in February.

So, will Malaysians have to wait till the Tenth or even the Eleventh Malaysia Plans before such a financing scheme is implemented? Perhaps, only Chua or the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) in the Prime Minister's Department knows the answers.

But even if they knew, they don't seem to be talking to each other. For example, when the minister was asked about the appointment of a consultant to look into the project, he pleaded ignorance and snapped at the Press, 'You know more than me. You can even ask my KSU, he will not know.'

Unknown to him, the EPU had, in a letter to an NGO in January this year, revealed that a consultant had indeed been appointed and would begin working on the study in February.

So, in such a situation where two government departments don't seem to be working in unison, are we

surprised that it has taken more than 20 years to work out a viable healthcare financing scheme?

The 9MP says the Health Ministry will be the lead agency and the main provider of healthcare services for the nation. These services will be undertaken in collaboration with other relevant ministries and agencies. We hope they start talking to each other soon.

In the meantime, while details of a financing scheme are being worked out, there will be new policies and institutions over the next five years. The institutions being proposed are a Communicable Disease Centre, a National Crisis (Health) Preparedness and Response Centre, a National Cancer Institute and a National Oral Health Institute.

The new plan and policy are a National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS and a National Medicine Policy. Two new Acts will be implemented – the Medical Devices Act and a Traditional and Complementary Medicine Act. And for good measure, a National Ethics Board will also be set up.

It cannot be denied that all these policies, plans and legislation will further enhance the nation's health sector. The

government must be congratulated for its foresight.

But at the end of the day, what the people need is quite basic – an equitable, national healthcare scheme where no one is denied access to healthcare. For too long, we have had poor Malaysians begging and borrowing to undergo surgery. For too long, we have had public hospitals bursting at their seams due to overcrowding.

Given the importance and urgency of the matter, it is surprising that the RM10.28 billion development allocation for the health sector in the 9MP is, in fact, 5.3%, which is lower than the 5.6% allocated under the 8<sup>th</sup> plan.

Similarly, education and training has been allotted less. Under the 9MP, 23% has been allocated, while it was 25.7% previously.

Health and education are two of the basic needs of a country. Without them, we cannot improve our standard and quality of living. Surely, they deserve more? **mb**

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