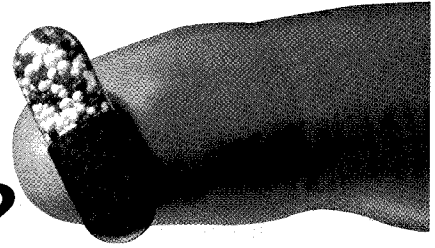


Another Bitter Pill?



Something seems to be brewing on the national healthcare scheme front, as non-governmental organisations would have us think. Rather than keeping mum on the issue, it would only be fair for the authorities to be transparent, as the health of the nation is not something to be treated lightly.

WILL the debate on the implementation of a National Healthcare Plan ever end? Or more importantly, when will such a scheme be implemented?

But given the recent turn of events, something seems to be brewing. Or at least that is what an alliance of 82 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) think.

Calling themselves the 'Coalition against Health Care Privatisation', they say the scheme is set to take off this year. The coalition has expressed concern about the lack of details on it and has called on the government to be transparent.

The fears of the NGOs are justified. In fact, they mirror the fears of the man-in-the street, who is worried sick about spiralling healthcare costs in the country.

And why shouldn't they be? After all, with government hospitals bursting at their seams and private hospitals putting profits above health, everyone is rightfully worried about costs.

As Health Minister Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek admitted in early December, the proposed healthcare scheme has been discussed for 20 years now by the authorities.

The first study was conducted under the Fourth Malaysia Plan, with funding from the Asian Development Bank. Subsequently, most of the development plans addressed the need for a form of healthcare financing scheme in the country. Sadly, little was done.

Twenty years must surely be a record for any country. So, how long more must we wait? Just like the Eighth Malaysia Plan, the Ninth Malaysia Plan will, in all certainty, also stress on the need to 'institute and manage a healthcare financing scheme'. With due respect, noble intentions alone are not enough.

But why the sudden interest in the subject now? The NGO alliance seems to think something is brewing and is demanding transparency. They want details of the scheme before it is implemented.

Persistent rumours surrounding the issue are unhealthy. There has been talk that parties with vested

interests are eyeing the privatisation of healthcare and want to run the healthcare fund. We hope this is not true. There is nothing worse than sacrificing the welfare of the sick and poor at the altar of profits.

When a national healthcare scheme is implemented, private hospitals and doctors must resist the temptation to overtreat or overcharge patients with insurance coverage. This is quite rampant now. Such practices will only lead to an escalation in insurance premiums.

There have been suggestions that the Social Security Organisation or Socso take up the role of national health financier. This is only logical, given its current role of providing insurance coverage to private sector employees.

According to Chua, the scheme will not be introduced this year. Well, it is not surprising, given that

nothing has been implemented in the last two decades.

But at least the authorities must be commended for their tireless efforts in conducting numerous seminars, debates, studies and conferences on the subject, even if nothing has come out of it. And in all probability, more such seminars and debates will be held.

The minister tells us he is waiting to be briefed by consultants who are working out the details. When were they appointed and when will their report be ready?

It would be good to identify the consultants and what their fees are as taxpayers' money is being used. We wonder how many other similar studies have been conducted in the last 20 years!

It is important that there is transparency before the proposals are implemented. Such a scheme must benefit the whole nation and not only a small group of people.

As the minister in charge, Chua should come up with a timeline on the proposed implementation of the scheme and stick to it. We have had enough delays.

Otherwise, we might just as well continue conducting studies for the next 20 years in search of the perfect health financing scheme. **mb**

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