

More budget needed for healthcare

BREAKDOWN: 'Time to increase medical cost at government hospitals'

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ANY reduction in the public sector's healthcare budget allocation can lead to a breakdown in services.

Former president of the Malaysian Medical Association Professor Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan said as it was, the lack of hospitals, beds and inadequate funding was already at a worrying level.

"There will be a breakdown and healthcare will become chaotic, unless there is an increase in allocation.

"I hope this budget (the 2017 Budget) will see a new trend, with

healthcare being given due importance by increasing the budget allocation," he told the *New Straits Times* yesterday.

Dr Tharmaseelan said according to the Health Ministry's Health Facts 2016, 143 public hospitals, including nine Special Medical Institutions, had 41,389 beds catering to 2,526,195 admissions, while 183 private hospitals had 12,963 beds catering to 1,064,718 admissions.

The lack of hospitals, beds and, most importantly, budget made bal-

ancing the needs of patients an onerous task for the ministry, he said.

"Many of the hospitals, especially the older ones, are in dire need of renovation.

"As much as the ministry puts up a stoic front avowing there is sufficient drugs and consumables, it is a known fact in public hospitals that they run dry before the last quarter of the year.

"While more new hospitals need to be built, the older ones are in need of urgent refurbishment.

"Though the budget, in reality, may not be increased so much, the government must at least increase revenue in the Health Ministry."

In the 2016 Budget, RM23.031 billion was allocated for the public health sector. This was RM269 mil-

lion less than the allocation for last year.

Dr Tharmaseelan said it was time to increase treatment and medical cost at government hospitals to reasonable levels to improve healthcare further.



Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan

"Charging RMI for any treatment is probably unheard of anywhere else in the world. The charges need to be increased. It will be perceived as unpalatable, but even parking fees cost much more."

Dr Tharmaseelan also said now might be the right time to impose a sugar tax on sugary food and drinks.

"A lot of health problems are caused by increased sugar intake —

diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

"These, along with the 'sin tax' (tax on items considered undesirable or harmful, such as alcohol or

tobacco) collected for tobacco and alcohol, should be allocated to the ministry to care for those afflicted by consuming these items."

On counterfeit medicines, he said the ministry's enforcement division needed to be strengthened to monitor the pharmaceutical industry.

"The number of employees have to be increased and lab facilities for testing also needs to be enhanced and widened."

Pharmaceutical Association of Malaysia executive director Ewe Kheng Huat said the government should target to increase the "sin tax" and use it to fund innovative medicine for the people.

"We should focus on ensuring funds are available to support access to innovative medicines. Many patients are forced to get such medicine from their own pockets.

"There should also be good private and public collaboration work in creating awareness and educating the public, particularly from online purchases to prevent any untoward incidents."