

Healthcare: Sabah not aggressive enough

Published on: Daily Express Front-page, Mon, Apr 14, 2025

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Kota Kinabalu: Sabah deserves better from the Federal Government in terms of health equity where everyone should have the chance to be as healthy as possible.

This includes allocations, aid, staffing, equipment, hospital buildings, clinics and facilities to have a holistic world class health system.

However, instances like a photo that went viral of a rural patient being ferried in a makeshift ambulance across mud by a buffalo in Kudat not too long ago shows this is clearly not the case, according to former State Medical Director Datuk Dr Christina Rundi.

She said this sad situation is probably due to Sabah's leaders being meek, when they should be more assertive and demanding.

"Just because Sabahans don't bang the table or organise demos, pickets, etc, we are ignored and sidelined," she told a recent Sabar-Kopitiam Council "Voices to Action" podcast on the state of healthcare in Sabah. She was accompanied by Gynaecologist and Obstetrician Dr Felice Huang.

Christina, who also heads the Sabah Medical Association, said Sabah is short of specialists, doctors, nurses, etc, which is aggravated by a brain drain, which she blamed on lack of understanding on the part of decision makers in Putrajaya.

Dr Felice said vacancies are available but not filled as many doctors and nurses seek greener pastures.

"There is a big difference in remuneration if working in Singapore or Middle East, up to three or four times more in salaries. Same for pharmacists.

"See how many pharmacies have been set up in Sabah. Some districts in Sabah lack pharmacists as many are working for these outlet chains.

"The same for physiotherapists, psychologists, etc. All these we have to address as it is becoming very critical. There is no income tax burden on those working in the Middle East."

Dr Rundi said the problem was acknowledged by one of the ministers. Even dressers or assistant medical officers. Many of these Sabahans are working in West Malaysia.

“We have to ask why because these are people trained to serve in Sabah. Sabah also needs to improve our infrastructure, water, electricity supply to alleviate hardships for all.”

According to Dr Felice, medical staff sent to serve in rural areas have to make so many sacrifices and, therefore, should be rewarded with better living conditions and internet connectivity.

“They have to spend so much more in fulfilling their transfer duties to new postings with or without their family members, to spend extra travelling expenses to go for career progression courses, etc.”

On whether any request was made for more doctors, Dr Rundi said: “We did ask. The Ministry depends on the Public Services Department on staffing matters working in liaison with the Federal Ministry of Finance.”

Dr Felice said the situation in Sabah and peninsula differs very much as they (decision makers in peninsula) may not understand the real situation but wonder why doctors serving in Sabah complain so much.

“They cannot imagine there are places where vehicles cannot access and patients have to be carried out. There are people who walk for hours just to see a doctor. It is very difficult and costly for these people to go to town for treatment, dialysis, etc. Some die of their ailment in the villages.

“We hope and we pray that with publicity, more attention will be focussed on Sabah. We hope that the powers to be will make life better for all people in Sabah.”

She believes it is necessary to make noise to achieve something good. Sabahans should demand their right to be accorded the same treatment as those in peninsula.

“Pay attention to the fact that Sabah is unique and is not the same as other states,” she said, and hoped things would change after the imminent State election.

“We need healthy Sabahans, happy Sabahans to make a better Sabah,” Dr Huang said, adding that as of 2020, Sabah had one doctor for every 856 people, almost double the national average.

The situation is similar for nurses, dentists, pharmacists, paramedics, and various allied health professionals. While urban health facilities are often fully staffed, clinics in districts like Paitan, Tongod, Nabawan, Kinabatangan and Kalabakan continue to struggle with manpower shortages.

She said in some clinics just one medical officer may be the only doctor serving an entire sub-district, with just a small team of nurses or health assistants covering a large population spread across vast terrain.

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"Sabah Voices to Action - Shaping Sabah's Future Together" is a citizen-driven, non-partisan initiative running from March to June 2025, dedicated to amplifying Sabahans' voices, fostering meaningful discussions, and shaping policies on education, healthcare, public infrastructure, and good governance.

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Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive Sabah!

