

Higher medical fees backfired: For foreigners as Sabah soon recorded polio cases

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By: David Thien

Kota Kinabalu: The Government's decision to raise medical fees for foreigners from RM1 to RM40 after 2015 was a mistake, according to former Sabah Medical Services Director Datuk Dr Christina Rundi.

She said the steep hike deterred these foreigners from seeking treatment which caused diseases like polio to spread in Sabah as they could not afford new fees.

The amendments to the Fees Act 1951 (Act 209) came into force in 2015. Non-citizen children were charged RM40 for registration, which included consultation and treatment. An additional RM40 is charged for every vaccination.

This compounded the issue of low immunization rates among non-citizen children as attendance at health clinics dropped over the years," Dr Christina told a recent Sabar-Kopitiam Council podcast.

Christina, who is now Sabah Medical Association President said that outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases is common in Sabah, even with an extensive network of static and mobile health clinics, and the rate for immunisation in government clinics being RM1 per visit.

What more when raised to RM40 per visit.

"All the polio cases reported in Sabah were caused by circulating Vaccine-Derived Polioviruses (cVDPV). This meant that weak polioviruses, found in oral polio vaccines, had mutated in the environment over time and caused the disease.

"For it to cause disease, it meant that there were many susceptible children, i.e., the immunisation rate for polio was low.

"The viruses were similar to the ones causing outbreaks across the Sulu Sea; this implied cross-border movements.

Things were already brewing even before the outbreak. She said Dec 6, 2019, at 2308 hours, is forever etched in her mind.

"The sample we sent for testing confirmed the country's first case of polio after 27 years, in a 3-month-old from Sabah, too young to have completed his polio vaccination.

"On Dec 8, 2019, the whole world knew of the loss of Malaysia's polio-free status.

"What followed was a flurry of activities: closed-door meetings, discussions, press releases, and eventually, a statewide vaccination campaign that began on Dec 27, 2019.

“As if one case was not enough, three more cases were reported, this time among older children, all of whom had not received polio vaccination.”

She said what followed on the heels of polio was Covid-19. Malaysia reported its first case of Covid-19 on Jan 25, 2020. Sabah maintained zero case status for almost two months while the vaccination activities were in full force.

“On March 13, 2020, I messaged all hospital directors and area health officers in Sabah that ‘while residents slept, our team in MKAKK worked through the night on the samples received. We confirmed Sabah’s first Covid-19 case.

“So then, it was polio and Covid-19. The following week, on March 18, 2020, Malaysia went into lockdown.

“Regardless, the vaccination campaign continued during the pandemic with a new standard of procedures.

“Health staff gowned up in full protective gear in the hot, humid outdoor environment.

“In a valiant demonstration of solidarity, everyone was on board with the control of polio and Covid-19.”

“After the immunisation campaign, ongoing Acute Flaccid Paralysis Surveillance, which was instrumental in detecting the first polio case in Sabah, revealed no new cases.

“On Sept 9, 2021, 641 days after the first reported polio case and months of surveillance, Malaysia regained its polio-free status from the WHO.

To ensure no polio repeats, all non-Malaysian children aged 7 years and below were exempted from the charges for registration and polio vaccination.

“As luck would have it, the polio vaccine comes in preparation with 5 other vaccines (Hepatitis B, Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus and Haemophilus influenza).

“That exemption meant that the 6-in-1 vaccine is now free for all children under 7 years old, regardless of nationality.”

“While this was a move in the right direction, other vaccines, i.e., BCG and measles-mumps-rubella vaccines, are not free.

“Why do you want to ‘lock the door but leave the windows open’?”

Dr Rundi stressed that measles is a very contagious disease; therefore, control of outbreaks must be instantaneous.

“Once upon a time, in hospitals in Sabah, doctors were treating many measles cases among infants, many of them less than 9 months old.

“Then, the measles vaccine was given at 9 months. However, in Sabah, it is given to 6-month-olds because Sabah doctors advocated for the intervention: administer the measles vaccine early, or hospital beds would be fully occupied with infants with measles, with resultant death due to measles.

“This is an exemplary demonstration of sheer determination and good decision-making based on experience. We should advocate the same move.

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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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For GRS and PH to decide the polls partners: Hajiji

Winnie Kasmir
SANDAKAN: Gubungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) will hold discussions with Pakatan Harapan (PH) regarding cooperation in preparation for the 11th State Election (PRN17).



Chief Minister Datuk Seri Hajiji Nawi (pic), who announced this, Saturday, said no date has been set yet for the discussion.

"We are currently in government, and God willing, we will hold talks with PH in the near future," he said, at the 2025 GRS (Gagasan Rakyat) Sungai Sibuga Division

Hari Raya Open House at the Sri Libaran Multipurpose Hall. The GRS chairman was asked whether PH leaders had already met with GRS to discuss the possibility of cooperation ahead of PRN17.

Hajiji also reiterated his stand on who should initiate cooperation with other conditions or parties, following Barisan Nasional (BN) Sabah's recent announcement of its collaboration with PH Sabah.

He said as the party leading the current GRS-PH Plus Government, it is up to them to decide who their partners would be for the upcoming election.

"The State Government is GRS-PH Plus, that's clear—but in politics, we look for what

is best to unite the people. We want political stability in Sabah.

"So, regardless, our doors are not closed to those who wish to work with us."

Sabah Umno head Datuk Bung Moktar Radin said recently that Barisan Nasional of which it is a component, would be cooperating with Pakatan Harapan, causing a stir in both camps, claiming it had already been decided in a meeting in Penang last year.

PH components DAP and PKR said there was nothing final on who should be partnering who.

At the end of the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) sitting last Thursday, Hajiji hinted that GRS would still prefer PH as its coopera-

tion partner despite BN Sabah announcing a collaboration with PH.

Meanwhile, around 5,000 guests attended the Hari Raya celebration, which was enlivened with musical and dance performances, along with the presentation of contributions to 39 students, teachers and staff of a Maahad Tahfiz, as well as orphans.

Also present were State Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Dr Mohd Arifin Mohd Arif, State Community Development and People's Wellbeing Minister Datuk James Ratih, State Local Government and Housing Assistant Minister Datuk Isnin Alias and Assistant Rural Development Minister Datuk Samad Januri.

Gagasan Rakyat leaders in attendance included Secretary-General Datuk Mohamed Razali Mohamed Razi, Women's Chief, Datuk Redonah Bahanda, Youth Women's Chief, Miss Emmie M. Mang, Supreme Council Member, Datuk Awang Kadin Tang, and Gagasan Rakyat Sungai Sibuga Division Chief, Datuk Aminah Yahyah.

Hajiji also attended the Hari Raya Open House hosted by appointed Assemblyman Datuk Jufai Wailam in Kampung Kesangan Maas and presented letters of appointment to the Village Development and Security Committees (JDRK) of Kampung Semawang and Kampung Jaya Bakti in the Gum-Gum constituency.

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"This is an exemplary demonstration of sheer determination and good decision-making based on experience. We should advocate the same move."

"Give the measles vaccine free to all children, or we will continue to drain our budget to control measles outbreaks."

