

## Online survey showed many docs wanting to quit

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CODE Blue Survey published in 2023. Code Blue's online survey titled "Dissatisfaction Among Health Care Professionals and Workers in Malaysia's Government Health Service", was conducted from Jan 11-24, 2023.

The survey among government doctors, pharmacists, dentists, medical assistants, nurses and allied health care workers nationwide, showed more than half are willing to go on strike, while seven in 10 are thinking of quitting.

Government health care professionals in Malaysia nationwide, not just doctors, are reporting high levels of anger and dissatisfaction at the situation in the public health care system.

Even though Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's administration appears to treat health as status quo, a whopping 95 per cent of the poll believe that Malaysia's public health care system is in "crisis".

A disturbing 73 per cent of respondents said they're thinking about quitting the government health service.

Over half (52 per cent) said they would take part in a strike if one was organised for public health care workers, while a third (34 per cent) expressed uncertainty about their participation.

Put together, many government health care professionals are either willing to or uncertain about walking on the job. Only 14 per cent opposed taking industrial action.

The fact that more respondents are willing to quit rather than to go on strike shows potential challenges by the Government to retain public health care professionals.

Industrial action means that workers may remain in the service if their demands are acceded to, compared to those who leave quietly without stating what can be done to make them stay.

On a scale of zero ("not angry") to four ("furious"), more than half (53 per cent) the respondents said they are "furious" – the highest level of anger – at the existing situation in the public health care system.

More than a quarter (27 per cent) are "very angry", while 13 per cent are "angry". Only two per cent said they are not angry.

A whopping 83 per cent feel the Government isn't serious about addressing issues in public health care. Dr Zaliha Mustafa, a freshman MP from PKR, is the current Health Minister in the unity government, succeeding Khairy Jamaluddin.

About eight in 10 respondents in Code Blue's survey said they are overworked and underpaid. Nearly three-fourths (74 per cent) said they're burned out, and six in 10 expressed insecurity about their career progression.

After making headlines, a quarter (25 per cent) of respondents said they face workplace bullying, while two per cent said they face sexual harassment at work.

What is interesting about Code Blue's survey findings is the near equal representation of contract and permanent staff, the participation of senior doctors up to the subspecialist level, as well as the (albeit small) representation of pharmacists, dentists, medical assistants, nurses and allied health care workers.

This indicates that workplace frustrations in the public health service, particularly in the MOH, are shared across seniority and profession, not just limited to junior and contract doctors who held a one-day strike in mid-2021.

Malaysia's longstanding failure to invest in public health care infrastructure and workforce – even after Covid-19 highlighted the damaging outcomes of a chronically underfunded health care system – has stretched health care workers to the limit.

The pandemic appears to have exacerbated burnout, workforce shortages and staff turnover, with more people likely sicker after disrupted care from the past three years, though MOH has not released data on patient load and health human resource trends.

Some 17 per cent of respondents wrote verbatim responses on issues that they're facing at work. Their complaints broadly relate to immense work burdens, understaffing, unfair pay, and insufficient amenities and equipment in public health care facilities.

A contract medical officer (MO) working at a public hospital highlighted the discrepancy in pay and perks between existing permanent MOs and those recently appointed into permanent positions. For the latter, their pay grade does not reflect their years of service when they were under contract.

"It starts from zero. Meaning, if you've been a contract MO, say, from 2018 and then you got your permanent post in 2022, you still get the same base pay, and [it] only increases four years after permanent employment. That's eight years of service.

“Why? Do contract officers don’t do the same job? They don’t hold the same responsibilities? Why the discrimination between years of service? Work is work,” the MO wrote.

“I am actively seeking employment out of the country. I do not want to keep working and be stuck in a system that doesn’t appreciate the work I do, that does not care for the welfare of officers. And of course, there’s the horrible pay for on-calls, I’m sure you’ve read about it.

“So, if anyone has the opportunity to leave, they will. And when the ministry realises they’ve turned a blind eye for way too long, it’ll be too late,” the MO wrote.

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