

Doctors to be disallowed from dispensing medicines

By Annie Freeda Cruz

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KUALA LUMPUR: Soon, doctors will not be allowed to dispense medicines. Doctors will only be allowed to prescribe medications but patients will have to get the medicines from pharmacies. Currently, doctors diagnose the disease, prescribe the medicines and their own clinics dispense them.

For almost 20 years, pharmacists have been fighting for the "return" of their right to dispense medications but had been unsuccessful for various reasons.

A pilot project on the separation of functions between doctors' clinics and pharmacies will be launched by the Ministry of Health.

It is scheduled to be launched at selected major towns with the ministry closely monitoring the strength and weaknesses of the system before implementing it nationwide.

Director-General of Health Tan Sri Dr Ismail Merican said the ministry was not able to implement this system earlier due to logistics problems, especially the shortage of pharmacists and pharmacies in the country.

"We also have to take into consideration the welfare of patients. If we have the separation, then patients must have easy accessibility to pharmacies to get their prescribed medications," he told the New Straits Times.

He said the ministry had conducted a detailed study, "Pharmacy and clinic Mapping" on various issues ranging from welfare of patients, facilities available and capability of pharmacies to meet the demand.

"We found that the logistics problem is still an issue and needs to be resolved as we do not want patients to be running around looking for pharmacies with the doctors' prescriptions," said Dr Ismail.

Furthermore, he said, the pharmacies should be able to provide quality care.

He said the ministry had been doing the study with various stakeholders, focusing on the spread of community pharmacies or pharmacy outlets in major towns, rural and remote areas.

Some 5,000 registered pharmacists are actively practising in some 1,600 pharmacies nationwide.

In 2004, there were only 3,927 registered pharmacists with about 1,540 retail pharmacies or one for every 16,445 persons.

Dr Ismail said the pilot project would be implemented in major towns based on the study where there were pharmacies near clinics.

"If the pilot project is successful, we will have to look into the existing laws to allow for the

separation," he added.

India, South Korea and Taiwan have implemented the separation. Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society president John Chang Chiew Pheng said the ministry's move to conduct a pilot project was definitely a positive development which would enhance the level of healthcare delivery.

The separation, he added, would benefit patients as doctors could now focus on their clinical, diagnosing, counselling and prescription, while pharmacists could focus on educating patients on how best to optimise the usage of medicines prescribed.

Furthermore, Chang said, pharmacists could help patients choose between generic and branded drugs based on their financial situation.

"With commitment and determination we can overcome teething problems and patients can understand their medicines," he added.

He said if the government went ahead with the separation, then more pharmacies could be set up near clinics for easy accessibility to patients.

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