

United against profiting from disease

WE refer to the ongoing influenza outbreak in Malaysia and the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak in several Asian countries. There are allegations that prices of flu vaccines and antiviral medicines in Malaysia are now much higher than during non-outbreak periods.

As a coalition of professional, civil and political organisations, we are united against profiteering from disease. We urge all stakeholders to fulfil their public duty to protect the health of the rakyat.

There are many legitimate reasons for the higher-than-normal prices. One, the supply of medicines remains low despite spiking demand due to understandable public fears, although the Health Ministry has announced that more supplies will arrive soon.

Two, the public's increasing belief in the benefits of vaccination, which is a positive sign especially since the polio cases in Sabah.

Three, influenza vaccines are not considered controlled medicines and therefore the prices are not controlled.

However, there could be another

reason – profiteering by irresponsible actors in the private healthcare sector. We believe that they are a very small minority although their impact is large. Their irresponsible actions will harm the image and reputation of the entire health profession. This will lead to the public losing trust in both the private and public healthcare sector, with implications for individuals and our health system.

Profiteering from disease is against religion, medical ethics and Malaysia's moral values. It is also illegal under our Price Control and Anti-Profiteering Act (2011) and Regulations (2018).

The safety of the rakyat is the first priority. Therefore, we urge all stakeholders to fulfil their moral, legal, ethical and public duty to protect the health of the people.

All stakeholders must charge affordable prices for healthcare at all times, whether or not there is an outbreak. Profiteering during disease is especially deplorable, and we denounce it in the strongest possible terms.

We also urge the government to appropriately investigate any

claims of profiteering during the current flu outbreak according to the powers invested in the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry.

During this outbreak, we expect transparency of information from the Health Ministry as well as a coordinated government effort to manage polio, influenza A and the Wuhan coronavirus.

On the supply side, we urge the government to quickly and assertively expand the supply of flu vaccines and antiviral medicines by diversifying our supply sources.

A larger and more diversified supply must be accompanied by a clear and fair plan for distribution to the rakyat, and between the public and private sectors. Access to medicines and risk communication must be improved throughout the country.

There must also be a long-term plan to ensure Malaysia's vaccine security, perhaps by enhancing local manufacturing capacity to reduce our reliance on foreign suppliers.

Planning for outbreak responses must improve our detection and

surveillance capabilities in collaboration with other countries.

Malaysia must also have a strategic medicines stockpile, as the risk of outbreaks will increase over time.

Outbreaks can be scary times, especially when we or our loved ones are at risk. To the public, we assure you that we will commit all our resources and expertise to keep Malaysia and Malaysians healthy and safe.

We ask you to act calmly, practise good hygiene, see your doctor if you're feeling unwell and adopt the healthy habits of proper nutrition, exercise and rest.

Equally, we ask that you trust official sources of information and not rely on unverified information on social media.

The health of the rakyat is our first priority. We urge all stakeholders to fulfil their duty and not to engage in profiteering during disease. Together we can overcome these outbreaks.

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