Plan to improve Orang Asli healthcare in final stages

THE Health Ministry is finalising the Orang Asli Social Determinants of Health Strategic Plan 2025-2035 to ensure the community has access to healthcare services on par with the general population in Malaysia.

Newly appointed Deputy Health Minister Datuk Hanifah Hajar Taib said the strategic plan was developed using a Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society approach, involving 17 ministries and agencies, including the Orang Asli Development Department.

"This is to ensure health interventions are aligned with the national social and economic development direction for the Orang Asli community, towards a healthy, progressive society that is rooted in culture and environmental sustainability," she said during question time in the Dewan Negara yesterday, Bernama reported.

She was responding to a question from Senator Manolan Mohamad on whether the ministry has prepared a special health action plan for the Orang Asli under the 13th Malaysia Plan (13MP).

Hanifah said the strategic plan will also serve as a dedicated Orang Asli health action plan to support the 13MP's commitment to improving access to and equity in healthcare services through a Social Determinants of Health approach.

Separately, she said 183 samples, or 5.7% of the 3,220 food samples analysed from January to September this year, were found to be non-compliant with the Food Regulations 1985.

Hanifah said the samples involved meat, fish, vegetables and fruits sold at public markets and retail outlets, including imported products inspected at entry points and in local markets.

The inspections were carried out through a year-round, risk-based food sampling programme to analyse various food safety parameters, including pathogenic bacteria such as Salmonella and E. coli, heavy metals like lead, veterinary drug residues such as beta agonists and pesticide residues, including propamocarb.

"For imported products found to be non-compliant, enforcement actions include nationwide product recalls, disposal, re-export and prosecution.

"For domestic products, enforcement actions include product recalls, disposal, investigations and prosecution against parties found to be in breach of regulations," she said.

She was responding to a question from Senator Datuk Rosni Sohar on measures taken by the ministry to ensure food and raw material safety at public markets nationwide amid concerns over contamination.

'Strategic plan to boost healthcare for *Orang Asli* community'

KUALA LUMPUR: The Health Ministry is finalising the Orang Asli Social Determinants of Health Strategic Plan 2025–2035 to ensure the community has access to healthcare services that is on a par with the general population.

Newly appointed Health Deputy Minister Datuk Hanifah Hajar Taib said the plan was developed using a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, involving 17 ministries and agencies, including the Orang Asli Development Department.

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VIRAL VIDEOS, PHOTOS

Police to probe animal deaths at abandoned veterinary clinic

PETALING JAYA: Police are investigating reports lodged by netizens over the death of animals in an abandoned veterinary clinic in Damansara Damai, Selangor after photos and videos emerged of a dead dog and a cat.

District police chief Assistant Commissioner Shamsudin Mamat confirmed that several reports had been lodged.

Netizens were shocked and outraged after photos and videos emerged showing a dead dog and a cat at an allegedly abandoned veterinary clinic in Damansara Damai.

The post by animal activist Shima Aris on Instagram showed the clinic in disarray, with equipment left untouched, cages and rubbish piled haphazardly and animal faeces scattered across rooms as animal rescuers searched the premises.

The dead animals were found decomposing, with their heads protruding between bent cage bars.

One traumatised cat, seen meowing and visibly unkempt in one of the videos, was rescued.

She said two veterinarians accompanying the rescuers confirmed that the animals had been dead for between seven and 10 days.

Animal welfare organisations Stray Free Foundation and Stray Animal Association of Malaysia (SAFM) called for investigations by the police and the Veterinary Services Department.

SAFM said it was "horrified" by the discovery of the dead dog and cat in the premises.

"This neglect is a violation of the legal and moral responsibilities owed to the animals under their care."

Under Section 29 of the Animal Welfare Act, those found guilty of abusing animals can be fined up to RM100,000, or imprisoned up to three years, or both.

The *New Straits Times* spoke to neighbours of the clinic and learnt that the place was shuttered several months ago. The clinic is located on the ground floor of a five-storey block.

One neighbour, who lived in a unit directly above the clinic, complained of a stench emanating from the place.

The neighbour, who declined to be named, said she met the veterinarian previously and described her as a middle-aged woman.

She said the clinic would be open for business several days a week before it was shuttered several months ago.

The neighbour described the smell as being strong and almost unbearable when the shutters were opened by an employee who used to visit the premises once in a while.

When asked why she did not complain, she said she didn't want to seem nosy and cause trouble.

COMMENT by Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Ibrahim

Risky gamble to privatise universities

MALAYSIA'S higher education sector stands at a precipice. Public universities, once pillars of national aspiration and social mobility, are grappling with chronic underfunding.

Now, whispers and actions point towards a radical solution: privatisation. Framed as a path to financial sustainability and competitive autonomy, this shift is presented as a necessary evolution.

But is privatising our public universities truly a healthy development or a dangerous gamble that risks exacerbating the decline it purports to solve? Is mixing public and private healthy? Popular opinion suggests otherwise, arguing that private higher education should remain the domain of fully private universities, many of which have already established recognised global credibility.

Proponents offer a solid rationale - public coffers are strained and universities are constrained by bureaucratic controls that stifle innovation in hiring, curriculum development and research focus.

The logic is that privatisation would free universities from such shackles, allowing them to raise tuition fees, attract corporate partnerships and commercialise research more aggressively.

Universities are free to set salaries to attract top talent, design relevant programmes quickly and manage resources efficiently without layers of red tape. With more resources and autonomy, universities can invest in cutting-edge facilities, recruit star academics, enhancing Malaysia's reputation. Sounds easy. Yet, this seductive vision hides profound risks for a nation already wrestling with inequality and the core purpose of public education.

The most glaring danger is the gutting of accessibility. Public universities are the primary gateway for students from B40 and M40 families. Privatisation inevitably means significantly higher tuition fees. This risks creating a two-tiered system: premium education and underfunded alternatives or no tertiary education at all for the less affluent. This directly contradicts Article 12 of the Federal Constitution and decades of national policy aimed at widening access.

Social mobility, already strained, would suffer a severe blow. When universities become financially autonomous corporations, the pressure to generate revenue becomes paramount. This risks distorting their core mission. Will lucrative programmes flourish while crucial but less profitable fields wither? Does research prioritise quick commercial wins over fundamental, long-term inquiry vital for national progress?

Privatisation doesn't automatically eliminate bureaucracy; it often replaces state control with complex corporate governance and shareholder pressures. Who then ensures these newly private entities remain accountable to the public interest?

Robust mechanisms to prevent profiteering, protect academic freedom and ensure fair representation in governance are essential but challenging to design and enforce. While potentially attracting some international stars with higher salaries, privatisation could accelerate the exodus of local talent.

Academics and students facing skyrocketing costs domestically may find opportunities abroad - even in neighbouring countries offering quality public education - far more attractive. This hollows out the national intellectual core.

Privatisation treats the symptom but ignores the deeper disease. Much of the current malaise stems from historical underfunding by the state itself, politicised appointments, administrative bloat and sometimes rigid adherence to outdated pedagogical models. Simply changing the ownership structure without tackling these internal inefficiencies and ensuring adequate, stable public investment in national human capital is unsustainable.

Curriculum and research must be realigned to address Malaysia's specific challenges rather than slavishly following global trends. –BERNAMAPIC

The challenges facing Malaysian public universities are real. However, privatisation of public universities is not the answer, with potentially catastrophic social costs. A healthier approach demands courageous reform within the public framework.

The state must recommit to higher education as a strategic national investment, not a cost centre. This requires sustained, significant budget increases tied to performance metrics focused on quality, research impact, graduate employability and equity - not just rankings.

Grant universities substantial operational autonomy - in hiring, finance and curriculum - while remaining publicly owned and funded. Establish independent, merit-based boards with strong academic representation. Autonomy must be paired with clear accountability frameworks focused on public good outcomes.

Encourage universities to supplement, not replace, public funding through ethical research commercialisation, endowments, executive education and alumni partnerships - without compromising access through exorbitant fees for core undergraduate programmes. Needs-based scholarships must be massively expanded.

Universities must aggressively tackle internal inefficiencies, reduce administrative bloat, modernise teaching methods and foster meritocratic cultures.

Streamlining bureaucracy is crucial, regardless of funding source. Curriculum and research must be realigned to address Malaysia's specific challenges - sustainable development, technological leapfrogging, social cohesion and ethical governance - rather than slavishly following global trends.

Privatising Malaysia's public universities is not a healthy development; it is a desperate gamble with the nation's future human capital. While the quest for financial sustainability and autonomy is valid, sacrificing equity, accessibility and the core public mission is a profound mistake.

True health for our higher education sector requires renewal: a recommitment to robust public funding coupled with deep, courageous internal reform and a steadfast focus on serving all Malaysians.

We need universities that build the nation, not just balance sheets. The alternative is not progress but a deeper, more entrenched decline. Better to empower the nation's 100% private universities.

Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Ibrahim is *affiliated with the Tan Sri Omar Centre for STI Policy Studies at UCSI University and is an adjunct professor at the Ungku Aziz Centre for Development Studies, Universiti Malaya. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com*

Government must invest in ageing preparedness

MALAYSIA officially became an ageing society in 2021 when 7% of its population comprised people aged 65 years and above. Based on the United Nations' classification, this marks the first threshold before transitioning into an aged society at 14% and super-aged society at 20%.

Current projections suggest that Malaysia will reach aged society status as early as 2048 – far more rapidly than many Malaysians realise.

Population ageing, while often celebrated as a sign of socioeconomic progress, simultaneously reveals long-standing weaknesses within a country's labour structure, retirement systems, healthcare capacity and social protection policies.

People are living longer, yet institutional support systems designed to sustain them in old age are not keeping pace. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) projects that our elderly dependency ratio will climb from roughly 1:10 in 2020 to nearly 1:5 by 2040. This implies that for every five working-age Malaysians, there will be one aged 65 or above.

This widening imbalance poses a direct threat to the sustainability of Malaysia's economic growth and welfare system.

Compounding these pressures are structural gaps in Malaysia's retirement income framework.

The Employees Provident Fund (EPF), which remains the central pillar of the country's

social protection system, does not cover the entire labour force. Among Malaysia's 23.9 million working-age population, more than 14 million adults, or nearly 60%, remain without formal retirement protection.

Low wages further exacerbate these vulnerabilities. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Malaysia's low-pay incidence – the share of workers earning less than two-thirds of the median wage – is over 30%. This figure is more than double the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) average of 14%, placing Malaysia among countries with the highest concentration of low-income workers.

Low wages reduce workers' capacity to save consistently, entrenching financial precarity for millions.

Ageing, therefore, is not only a demographic transition but also a socioeconomic fault line that increasingly undermines older Malaysians' financial resilience.

The absence of comprehensive social protection compels many older Malaysians to depend heavily on their children. Findings from the Social Wellbeing Research Centre (SWRC) show that over 55% of elderly Malaysians rely on financial transfers with adult children contributing an average of RM526 per month – almost a fifth of their income.

This family-dependent model, once sustainable, is progressively eroding as wages stagnate and household finances tighten. As retirement savings prove inadequate, more senior citizens are compelled to remain in the workforce.

The government has acknowledged these challenges. Through the 13th Malaysia Plan (13MP), policymakers have floated the possibility of raising the statutory retirement age beyond 60, arguing that longer lifespans justify extended labour participation and that retaining experienced workers could ease long-term pension pressures.

But this policy addresses only a small part of a much broader structural problem. Malaysia's investment in ageing preparedness remains clearly insufficient.

Public health expenditure averages just 2.2% of gross domestic product (GDP), one of the lowest among upper middle-income countries, and far below the global average of between 5 and 8% reported by the World Bank.

This chronic underinvestment raises serious concerns about the government's long-term commitment to building a resilient healthcare and eldercare system that includes expanding social protection coverage to gig workers, strengthening social assistance for vulnerable seniors, improving wage structures, modernising healthcare financing and creating age-inclusive labour market opportunities.

The question that policymakers, employers, families and society must confront is whether the country will act decisively now or wait until the consequences become overwhelming.

MOHAMAD FAUZI AHMAD
Research analyst (Economy)
Institut Masa Depan Malaysia