

AKHBAR : THE STAR
MUKA SURAT : 1
RUANGAN : MUKA HADAPAN

Nation

Four nabbed over graft

A CEO and two consultants of an FA are among four held over alleged RM6mil bribes. >4

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A pain many can do without

From patients to practitioners, the 8% SST on traditional and complementary medicine is a growing concern for them. Patients say that multiracial Malaysia needs these services, which play a complementary role to modern medicines. Practitioners want clarity from the government before it is implemented in March. > See page 5 for reports



Traditional cure: Acupuncturist Lak Pak Thye treating Tan Sew Kiang, 71, for a shoulder pain at the Lam Wah Ee Hospital Chinese Medicine Division in George Town, Penang. — CHAN BOON KAI/The Star

AKHBAR : THE STAR
MUKA SURAT : 5
RUANGAN : NATION

Reports by N. TRISHA, IMRAN HILMY, RAGANANTHINI VETHASALAM, FATIMAH ZAINAL and HO JIA WEN

A tax on the poor, say patients

SST on traditional medicine to mostly affect low-income groups

GEORGE TOWN: The patients of various races who were waiting for their turn at a non-profit Chinese medicine facility here have different ailments but a common concern.

Besides wanting to get better, their worry now is that the affordable prices at this clinic will increase.

These patients, some of whom came from out of state, were seeking traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM), which would be subject to an 8% sales and service tax (SST) from March.

Healthcare services using modern medicine are fully exempted from the SST.

A check on the daily crowd of patients yesterday found that most patients were over 50 years old. Some of them were stroke victims, some were battling cancer, while others suffered problems like back pain and frozen shoulder.

"Take a look around you. Most of us are elderly and no longer employed," said retired clerk Rohaya Omar, 65.

She said it did not seem right to impose additional charges on T&CM treatments.

"I would come here from the mainland whenever I have body aches.

"I even tried their cupping procedure for gastric (problems).

"This time, my hip is giving me trouble, so I come for acupuncture sessions," she said.

Rohaya said patients like her were "seeking treatment for ailments, not leisure".

"We would not be here if we did not need to," she said.

From March, T&CM facilities, such as Chinese traditional medicine shops and services with an annual turnover of RM500,000, will have to pay an 8% SST.

In a Health Ministry circular recently, industry players were

also told to settle the SST dating back to 2018, which was when the tax was revived to replace the now-abolished goods and services tax (GST).

Another patient at the facility yesterday was dim sum kitchen helper Tan Sew Khiong, 71, who travelled from Sungai Petani, Kedah, for his second round of acupuncture.

"My shoulder has been painful for quite a while and I can no longer sleep on my side," said Sew Khiong, who was sent here by his son Tan Choon Chuang, 42.

Citing his own experience with T&CM, Choon Chuang said he had suffered spine problems two years ago but the pain eased after 10 acupuncture sessions.

"These treatments work and are easier on the pocket compared with modern medicine," he said.

Choon Chuang felt that imposing SST on T&CM would affect

people from the lower income group.

"Usually, people come here because it is cheap and effective, so I hope the price does not increase," he said.

Taxi driver G. Nathan, 57, said he had been depending on T&CM since suffering a mild stroke two years ago.

"I have blood pressure and diabetes too," he said.

Nathan said the clinic charges RM41 for consultation and acupuncture.

"The government should not charge tax for treatments like this. It is affordable, unlike most modern treatments," he said.

Mini market owner Loh Keng Bin, 71, is a regular patient for over eight years after a stroke made it hard for him to walk.

"While I pay only RM41 and 8% tax on that amount will not be much, it is still money.

"We need to come many times

for treatment and the tax will add up," he said.

Traditional Chinese medicine practitioner Lak Pak Thy said the clinic offered treatments for cancer, body aches, gastric, stomach issues and other ailments.

"Most of them are stroke patients. We offer various treatments with different specialists.

"The charges are basic. It does not vary and it is fixed to make it easier for the people," he said.

On Thursday, MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Wee Ka Siong said T&CM should be exempted from the tax, noting that such services are regulated by law and accepted by the Health Ministry and are even available in some government hospitals.

"T&CM treatments – which include traditional Chinese, Malay and ayurvedic medicine – should be given an SST exemption as what is provided for modern and veterinary medicine," he said.

The burden will fall on us, say consumers

KEPALA BATAS: Those seeking traditional Malay health treatments want the government to consider their plight as they are anxious about prices once the sales and service tax (SST) kicks in.

Retail assistant Nurul Asyiqin Mohd Basri, 21, said she and her family often consulted these traditional healthcare practitioners for massages and treatments.

"If the government imposes the SST on traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) services, the burden will fall on us," she said.

Nurul Asyiqin lamented about the rising cost of living, saying this SST would affect consumers like her.

She said she hoped the government would review its decision to impose the tax on T&CM operators.

Syed Amir Syed Ahmad, 45, who frequently relies on tradi-



Healing hands: A patient getting a massage treatment from a Malay traditional massage therapist in Kepala Batas. — ZHAFARAN NASIB/The Star

tional Malay treatments for his ailments, said the tax on T&CM felt unfair as people needed such services when they were unwell.

The government, he said, should meet with stakeholders and discuss the matter before imposing any additional tax.

Traditional massage centre

operator Mohamad Hasyim Mohd Rafidi, 46, said he and his fellow practitioners were still unclear whether they would be imposed the 8% SST.

"Under the Customs' General Guide of the Service Tax 2018, massage centres as well as health and wellness centres fall in the

same category as nightclubs, dance halls and beer houses, which are taxable.

"So, my question is, which category do I fall into?" he said.

He said this tax ruling would cause patients to seek out unregistered practitioners and face unknown risks.

Eligible practitioners urged to register

PETALING JAYA: Traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) practitioners who qualify to be registered practitioners, by having "experience" in the field, have been urged to do so before the end of the transition period.

In an announcement, the Health Ministry's Traditional and Complementary Medicine Division said the transitional period will end on Feb 29, 2024 – as per the sub-regulation 1(3) of the Traditional and Complementary Regulation 2021.

"Therefore, T&CM practitioners in recognised practice areas who wish to register with the T&CM Council via the requirement of experience route are advised to submit their applications for registration as registered practitioner as soon as possible before the end of the transitional period," it said.

Govt urged to consider SST exemption for all health services

PETALING JAYA: Worried about higher medical bills, traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) patients want the government to reconsider the move to impose an 8% sales and service tax (SST) on such services starting March.

Some of these patients use T&CM to complement modern treatments.

Farhana Ali, who has been using acupuncture to manage pain related to her cancer and chemotherapy, said: "Acupuncture is not cheap. It costs between RM50 and RM250 per session.

"And with the 8% SST, the bill is only going to increase further.

Paying RM4 to RM25 more will be a burden as you need several sessions."

The 43-year-old housewife said she hoped the government would consider an SST exemption for health services.

Engineer CH Soo said 8% would be "too much" for those undergoing T&CM treatments.

He said he had a sprained knee that led him to seek treatment for six months.

All in, he went for 30 sessions, and it cost him RM83 each visit. This included massages, acupuncture and herbal bandaging. Occasionally, herbal medicine was prescribed, which cost RM150.

Soo, 36, said he would seek out T&CM for other issues in the future.

Another patient, who only wanted to be known as Halimah, said she opted for Malay traditional medicine for minor problems as outpatient treatment at private health clinics was unaffordable to her.

"As for government health facilities, the queue can be very long," she said.

She said there was less waiting time for traditional treatments, besides being cheaper.

"At least it is not as expensive as private clinics.

"Still, 8% is a lot to pay. It will

make it less affordable for people like me who want faster services without having to pay a lot at private facilities," she added.

Retiree Ng Bo Lim, 75, who has glaucoma, said she had been relying on acupuncture.

She is worried that her treatment would become more costly and her son would have to foot a higher bill if the price of acupuncture increases.

Lorry driver R. Anba hoped to have more clarity from the government whether physiotherapy would also be affected by the SST.

"I read the news that SST will cover physiotherapy. If this is

true, it will be very burdensome for me as I require frequent sessions after an accident. The sessions cost me thousands of ringgit," he said.

Anba, 47, said he had been dipping into his savings to pay for his physiotherapy sessions.

"I hope the government will exempt physiotherapy from SST as a lot of people rely on physiotherapy at private centres or facilities," he said.

FORMORE:

See page 6

AKHBAR : THE STAR
MUKA SURAT : 6
RUANGAN : NATION

Govt urged to explain why T&CM is not tax-exempt

PETALING JAYA: More clarity is needed over the implementation of the 8% Sales and Service Tax (SST) on Traditional and Complementary Medicine (T&CM), says the Malaysian Chinese Medical Association.

Its president Dr Heng Aik Teng said providers needed further explanation from the government on the matter.

Many of them thought that they were categorised under the medical field as T&CM services are recognised by the Health Ministry.

"If we are placed under the medical field, then we have to request the government to give us the SST exemption.

"We have no objection to charging the SST but if the modern medicine field can be exempted, then why do our clients have to pay taxes for T&CM treatments? We definitely need more clarification on this," he said.

Association of Malay Naturopathy Medicine Practitioners Malaysia chairman Norhissam Mustafa expressed hope that the SST exemptions, which are provided for modern medicine, could be extended to T&CM practitioners.

He said they had to undergo procedures similar to modern medicine practitioners, including registering with the T&CM Council, renewing their Annual Practice Certificate, having qualifications that are recognised, and complying with the T&CM Act.

While fewer than 10% of T&CM practitioners are expected to be affected by the SST, he said the issue went beyond the tax amount. (T&CM facilities with an annual turnover of RM500,000 annually will have to charge 8% in SST from March.)

"But the issue is not just the tax percentage. The most significant part is the cost of managing the tax collection.

"This can increase the price of the T&CM services by 15% to 20%. There is no doubt that clients will start switching to unregistered and unqualified practitioners to get cheaper services," he added.

Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association chief executive officer Saravanan Thambirajah said ideally, healthcare should be exempted from taxes.