

## Safety council will safeguard health of patients, avert medical errors

Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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The action taken by the Ministry of Health to systematically document and manage incidences that effect patient's safety is a laudable step on ensuring a higher standard of health care in the country.

Through the establishment of a National Patient Safety Council, Malaysia are reassured that their health will be attended to more closely not only by the relevant health professionals but also by the Safety Council.

The council, approved by the Cabinet in January 2003, is mandated to look into aspects relating to "data and information, consumer education and empowerment, continuing education, medical safety, transfusion safety, and safe staffing and quality of work life" (NST, Sept 5), all of which are important to promote safety.

In short, by putting in place the appropriate policies, processes and procedures for risk prevention, the health delivery system can be significantly improved.

This is because it ca proactively avert potential medical errors facility failures, reducing the occurrence of injuries and the loss of lives.

The more is timely, in view of the recent concern about falling standard of care judging from the increasing number of complaints as reported recently (NST, Sept 1).

Based on medical literature, in the US alone, there are 180,000 deaths each year due to errors in the medical care, many of which are preventable.

Unfortunately, we lack such comprehensive reports to give a clear picture as to what is actually happening, hence the relevance of the council, so that suitable measures can be planned to address the problems.

The problems, enumerated by the deputy director-general of health, range form mistakes in blood transfusion, to diagnosis and treatment due to inaccurate laboratory tests, radiological misinterpretations, and errors in the administration of meditations.

Of these, perhaps priority should be given to the errors related to the use of medicines. Not only is the use of medicines very pervasive (thus has higher probability of errors), it also involves a huge number of unsupervised outlets ranging from side-street vendors to supermarkets.

Added to this, the level of public awareness about medicines among Malaysians is still very low.

The US Institute of Medicine recently estimates the number of lives lost to preventable medication errors alone represents over 7,000 deaths annually – more than the number of Americans injured in the workplace each year.

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