

SEMINAR: THE FUTURE OF PATHOLOGY PRACTICE IN MALAYSIA

Seeking representation in policy-making governmental bodies

Tan Sri Dato' Dr Abu Bakar bin Suleiman

Director-General of Health, Malaysia

When I was first asked to present this keynote address with the title 'Seeking Representation in Policy-Making Government Bodies,' I thought to myself what would the audience really want to know and how can I make this seemingly monotonous subject more interesting. I must apologize if some of you find what I have to say is too dry and drab as I had no choice in selecting the topic. Anyway, it's a sign that the Malaysian Society of Pathologists is really serious in playing a more active role in assisting the Government to make policy decisions. This is very important as many changes are currently proposed in an environment where there is a trend towards reform in health care. This would invariably affect health professionals and their practice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING REPRESENTATIONS

In this respect, I am happy to note that the Pathologists have sought to understand the government's decision-making process, towards achieving better representation of their views and ensuring contributions reach timely before important decisions affecting the public, in general, and the profession, in particular, are made. In doing so, the Society is rightly playing its role as a responsible professional body, with the well-being of the public and the profession in mind. Current issues, such as privatization of hospitals and health services, corporatisation of hospitals, control on the quality of laboratory practices and charting new directions in health care, as we move towards the next millennium are too important to be left to others alone to decide. Sir Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister made famous by the War, had this to say about leaving others to make decisions. He said that even "WAR SHOULD NEVER BE LEFT TO THE GENERALS ALONE TO DECIDE". So professionals have a role to play in providing invaluable input to the government when policies are being made.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR REPRESENTATION

When the Government makes policies, changes may take place which affect persons concerned in either an advantageous or disadvantageous way. The Government has been entrusted to make decisions for the good of the people. The government, in recent years, has taken several initiatives to provide the necessary forum for the private sector, professional bodies and interested NGO's to forward their view on issues that affect them and the public.

The Minister of Health, when he first took office, stated that he saw the Ministry of Health as working in partnership with the private sector and the NGO's, which includes professional bodies, as a tripartite partnership which will drive healthcare initiatives into the 21st century. This has been the guiding principle in the Ministry's dealings with the private sector, NGO's and professional bodies seeking representation on policy decisions related to health.

The Minister initiated the Annual Health Dialogue to provide opportunities for various interested groups to interact more openly with the Ministry of Health on issues pertaining to its programs, policies and activities. Two such dialogues have been held since last year where over 200 Professional Bodies, NGO's and groups representing health related industries were invited to put up memoranda highlighting issues of concern to them. In the recent dialogue held in June, 84 organizations responded to the invitation and 51 memoranda were received. Four full days were set aside to deliberate on the memoranda received.

CHANNELS FOR REPRESENTATION

Health is a rather broad subject covering areas that come under the jurisdiction of many Ministries. While the Ministry of Health is perhaps the major policy maker in matters related

to health, other Ministries, Statutory Bodies and various Authorities may, by necessity, make decisions and policies which affect the health of the people, either directly or indirectly. Universities, professional bodies, such as the Academy of Medicine, the Medical Association of Malaysia, and the private health sector by their stand on various health issues also contribute to the policy decision making process.

To channel such resources more effectively, the Ministry of Health, in line with the Malaysia Incorporated concept, has established a panel known as 'Panel Perundingan Antara Kerajaan dan Sektor Swasta' or the MOH Public-Private Consultative Panel, which has representations from various Medical Professional Groups such as the MMA, the FPMPAM (Federation of Private Medical Practitioners Association of Malaysia), APHM (Association of Private Hospitals Malaysia), the Dental and Pharmacy Associations as well as representatives from the Health Industry, in particular, the pharmaceutical industries. This panel meets 3-4 times a year to discuss various health issues that affect both the health profession and the health industry and the populace at large. Such a forum provides opportunities for consultation, regular feedback and sharing of ideas that are beneficial to the MOH in formulating health policies.

The Ministry of Health has kept constant contact with other government bodies and professional groups to discuss cross-cutting issues that are of mutual interest to all. The MOH, has from time to time, also established certain special working groups and *ad hoc* Committees to look into specific issues that require expert input and lengthy discussions to sort out certain complicated issues e.g. the *ad hoc* Committees for the Pathology Act, the Mental Health Act, and the HMO issue.

WAYS OF MAKING REPRESENTATION

The Malaysian Society of Pathologists should make use of the opportunities created by the Ministry of Health not only to discuss matters concerning the welfare of the profession, but also to use it as a forum to introduce ideas for change in government policies affecting the health of the population. Your Society should be active and make MOH aware of your activities through publications, invitations to forums and to participate in your activities. The Society should also be recognized as the opinion leader in your discipline and the undisputed voice of your profession. You should proactively take

up issues that concern your profession and make position statements, consensus statements, that can be used by government as a guide to policy making, legislation, regulation and standard setting.

LABORATORY AND PATHOLOGY SERVICES IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Health Policies that affect and determine the range and character of Laboratory Services in Government Hospitals and Clinics are made by the Ministry of Health. A number of recent developments are rapidly taking place which will affect this traditional approach. An important development is the rapid expansion of private hospitals and laboratory services like cytopathological services. The Ministry of Health, apart from trying to expand its services to cater for the increasing workload, may out of necessity, buy services from the private sector in areas which are in deficit and this practice is likely to be broadened in the future.

Policies and future plans for Laboratory Medicine and Pathology must primarily be shaped by Malaysia's Health Vision while taking into account other trends like changing disease patterns, changing demography and rapid advancements in technology. Malaysia's Health Vision states that "By the year 2020, Malaysia is to be a nation of healthy individuals, families and communities, through a health system that is equitable, affordable, efficient, technologically appropriate, environmentally adaptable and consumer friendly, with emphasis on quality, innovations, health promotion and respect for human dignity and which promotes individual responsibility and community participation towards an enhanced quality of life".

In line with this vision, just as in other health services, emphasis must now be on health promotion, patient/customer focused service, continuity of care, primary health care and greater patient or community participation. In support of this, there should also be establishment of centers of excellence whose role should be clearly defined by national policies.

The formulation of these national policies should ultimately meet national goals and the needs and expectations of the individual, as well as address the numerous health service issues. This requires input from professionals of all clinical disciplines, including clinical pathology, particularly where it impacts on the discipline. This is currently being practiced at the

implementation level through committees, working groups and consensus meetings.

The rapid changes in technology will have profound effects on policies, organization and delivering of pathology services. One sees the convergence of essentially four technologies upon the clinical laboratory namely information technology, measurement technology, communication and transportation technology.

Pathology will be an integral part of the four flagship applications with respects to Telemedicine in the Multimedia Super Corridor.

It is envisaged that future changes in the provision of health care in the country, which is in line with the principle of some cost recovery through payment for medical services by those who can afford them, while ensuring equitable and available care for the disadvantaged, will need significant policy changes and careful planning. It will mean that clear proposals and ideas on how this can be achieved must be obtained not only from the government but also from the private sector.

QUALITY, STANDARDS AND ETHICS

With the government policy on Privatization and Corporatization coupled with the uncontrolled proliferation of private laboratories, clinical pathologists are increasingly concerned with their impact particularly on professional standards, quality, ethics and the role of clinical pathologists and other issues. Complementing this, the Ministry is considering the establishment of some form of "Expert Advisory Committee in Pathology" which should at least comprise of members from different disciplines in pathology, appropriate medical and surgical disciplines and from the public health. Members may also include suitably qualified experts from Universities and other Institutions. The committee will function solely in an advisory capacity to the Director-General of Health. This was in fact one of the proposals presented by the *ad hoc* Jawatankuasa Teknikal Khas Perkhidmatan Makmal in 1996.

In addition it is felt that particularly in the area of setting and monitoring of quality standards, professional associations and societies in Pathology can make effective contributions both at the policy and implementation level. This may take the form of frequent dialogues related to specific issues. Issues and factors that may influence health policies related to Pathology are numerous.

Quality assurance in laboratory practice is

expected at public and private laboratories. The present uncontrolled proliferation of private laboratories whose quality is at best questionable and at worst dangerous, is great cause for concern. The Society and its members should be intimately involved in ensuring the highest laboratory standards which meet international good laboratory practices and certification are attained by all laboratories. This is an example where the Society needs to seek representation in policy decisions for the country.

A related area will be certification and legislation of laboratory practice. Legislation like the Pathology Act would be necessary to protect the patient. The main aim of the Quality Assurance Program has been to educate rather than to attempt any formal comparison between the performance of individual laboratories - and it merely looks at the output in the form of accuracy of results. The Pathology Services should also work towards attaining other form of international standards like ISO 9000 certification.

In the light of current manpower and other resource shortages and the intense pressure to be cost-effective there is a need to examine the utilization of laboratory investigations with respect to need and appropriateness. Tests should have proven diagnostic efficacy. This should include technical efficacy as well as clinical efficacy as measured by positive and negative predictive values. In addition the test should have diagnostic effectiveness i.e. have an actual impact on the *clinician's* diagnosis. Outer issues to be considered include effect on treatment plan, patient's outcome in terms of morbidity, mortality or change in functional outcomes.

Apart from clear policies on good laboratory practices which require clearly documented and proven Standard Operating Procedures in the laboratory, working together clinicians and clinical pathologists could develop mutually agreed investigative protocols and guidelines for specific clinical situations. This must be complemented by regular clinical audits, an important means of ensuring accountability, adherence to procedure and ensuring that patients receive excellent service and demonstrating that they do.

ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL BODIES

Professional bodies representing the various medical specialty disciplines are now fairly organized under the umbrella of the Academy of Medicine Malaysia. I am told that steps are

being taken to form a Chapter of Pathologists within the Academy as there are enough of you who are members of the Academy. I am certain that with the formation of the Chapter, you will certainly obtain a higher profile within the community. This means that your collective voice and deliberations will be more likely to be considered by government. In addition, other medical professional bodies like the Malaysian Medical Association will also be expected to **formulate** and submit proposals on health policy and planning for the government to consider.

Pathologists through their professional bodies can and should play a more proactive role in providing inputs to influence government in policy decisions which affect the provision of health care in general and medical laboratory issues in particular. Membership of specialist bodies like the Malaysian Society of Pathologists, carries with it the responsibility to utilize the expertise of members collectively, to critically examine advances in their areas of expertise, identify useful developments and advocate their use in appropriate health sectors.

It will be naive to ignore the need for professional bodies to seek representation in policy decisions. The benefits of being heard and even involved in decision making in health matters will have direct and indirect implications for the profession involved. Thus policy decisions on laboratory services will affect pathologists and laboratory practice in the public and private sectors. Implicit in representation is the opportunity to influence policy formulation and changes.

It will be pertinent to determine at what level professionals would like to seek representation and thereby exert influence for the benefit of the pathological services. Important issues where inputs from professional bodies are needed, arise at various occasions, but in the present national planning strategy, important policy decisions are made in 5-year Malaysia Development Plan cycles. The current 7th Malaysia Plan from 1996-2000 (7MP) will undergo a mid-term review next year when there will be fine tuning of policy decisions and perhaps opportunities for inputs from professional bodies.

The Malaysian Society of Pathologists like other professional bodies represent both government and private pathologists. The emphasis on issues may be different for professionals in the private and public sectors. Nevertheless, the professional body can be the best vehicle to address the issues faced by these different groups. Even for government officers

where there are established channels to submit proposals for change, there may be occasions where it would be more prudent to submit such proposals through the professional body than through established official channels, especially if they have far greater implications for the profession or the community as a whole.

An effective representation is needed if the professional body expects continued recognition by the government. To achieve that, the society must gain the confidence of the Ministry of Health through its direct and indirect actions. Responsible, objective and reasonable views and position on important issues that affect pathologists, laboratory services and the public will be expected. This should not be taken to mean that dissent on official positions cannot be allowed, rather objective, well thought out reasons why a different position is taken, should be presented to the government in a non-confrontational manner. Thus, effective leadership of the society is essential if it wants to play a meaningful role in seeking representation in policy-making situations. Policy implementation by the public and private sector should also be monitored by the Society and where needed it should alert the authority when serious non-compliance takes place.

The profession as a whole will benefit when its views are taken into consideration when government formulates policies. Even if its views and recommendations are not accepted, it is at least consulted and given reasons as to why such policies are made. Both the government and the Society will benefit through the channel of communication that is established when representation is present. In the ideal situation, both parties can work towards development of the profession for the good of the country.

The Society as a whole should always be constructive in attempting to contribute towards shaping policies. As true professionals, confrontational stance and criticisms that get personal should be avoided at all costs. The Ministry of Health, on its part, will ensure that senior officials are present when invited, failing which a suitable representative would be sent. The profession must show keenness and participate actively in government organized activities even if immediate benefits do not seem so clear, e.g. joining MOH delegations overseas.

The profession must also work closely in partnership with umbrella bodies, in this case, the Academy of Medicine, to ensure greater success in the changes sought. The reality is

that, sometimes, the umbrella body is in a better position to represent your interests, since government may not be able to call individual representatives of all the disciplines.

CONCLUSION

In summing up, I must point out that in making representations, you must have the interest of the community uppermost in your mind, i.e. to contribute towards the well-being and betterment of society, and not for the benefit of your profession alone. Your views and contributions, channeled to the right people at the right time, will be meaningful if at the end, you have made a difference to the policies made – one that brings society closer to better health and better quality of life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have presented to you the Ministry of Health's views and advice on how you could seek representation in government policy decision making. It is your responsibility now to look out for opportunities to make your presence felt. The Ministry of Health looks forward to working with the Malaysian Society for Pathologists in making Malaysia a nation of healthy individuals, families and communities as we approach the next century. I wish you all the best as you chart your course for a more meaningful role in helping to shape the health of the Nation in the years to come.