



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to the Editor

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Healthcare rights for undocumented people to protect the rakyat

Malaysia has seen only 36 COVID-19 cases and most of them have recovered; and this gives us a sense of security, a feeling that we will be fine even though the spread of the COVID-19 virus beyond China seems to be getting worse. However, there is a very crucial weakness in our system that has not been addressed and could yet cause an outbreak in our country. This weakness arises from a few factors: the Immigration Act 1959/63, the lack of a Non-Citizen Healthcare Act and undocumented people.

In January 2020, a group of healthcare professionals highlighted the need for a Non-Citizen Healthcare Act. They stated that non-citizens, particularly stateless people and illegal immigrants (undocumented people), are not getting the proper healthcare that every human being deserves. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the Immigration Act 1959/63 compels anybody who discovers an undocumented person to report it to the police.

This provision of the Immigration Act 1959/63 not only causes a dilemma for healthcare professionals as they have vowed to treat and save all people, but more importantly causes undocumented people to fear and avoid seeking medical attention even though it is crucial that they do so. This behaviour which is driven by the fear of being reported can lead to a health disaster of epic proportions.

Consider the situation where a highly contagious virus is going around. An illegal immigrant comes into contact with a person that is infected with the virus and subsequently becomes sick. However, the fear of being reported to the police would most likely deter him from seeking medical attention. There is a possibility without proper treatment/medical assistance he will die. Furthermore since the illegal immigrant has not sought medical attention, this person has not been properly quarantined. This would result in further spread of the dangerous virus to people that the illegal immigrant has come into contact with. Keep in mind that the illegal immigrant is laying low and will be untraceable.

The COVID-19 virus that is spreading across the globe and that could be declared a pandemic at any moment makes the above mentioned scenario something that will definitely happen if this virus starts to rapidly spread within our country.

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) asks the Malaysian Government to introduce a Non-Citizen Health Care Act and amend the Immigration Act 1959/63 so that undocumented people do not fear going to a hospital or clinic when they are sick. This is part of the government's duty to keep the rakyat safe.

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