

23% of people far from health care

By Sandra Sokial

KOTA KINABALU: Sabah has achieved an excellent health status though inaccessibility remains a major obstacle to a better health care delivery for people living in remote areas.

Founding dean of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) School of Medicine, Professor Dr Osman Ali said 23.7 per cent of the people are living in remote areas that are more than five kilometres from static health facilities.

Speaking during the professorial inaugural lecture at UMS yesterday, Osman said the rural health services in Sabah are provided through 11 health offices, 80 health clinics, 19 maternal and child health clinics and 190 rural clinics.

"A total of 687 doctors render health services in Sabah, where the doctor population ratio is 1:4,362. The nurse ratio is 1:564 whilst community nurse to population ratio is 1:1,458," explained Osman.

He added both ratios are still very high compared to other states in Peninsular Malaysia with 1:1,200.

Osman however noted that not all services are available at the remote rural centres, so inequities exist between rural and remote rural centres.

The issue of bypassing primary health care to get better services in major hospitals and private facilities is quite common in many areas for reasons related to distance, waiting time, availability of specialist doctors and



Professor Dr Osman Ali.

appropriateness of treatment.

"Other than that, maternal death is still quite common in Sabah, especially among foreigners. Most of the deaths are related to postpartum hemorrhage (25.9 per cent) and no antenatal check-up (44.6 per cent)," he said.

The rural areas are often associated with poverty, difficult communication, lack of infrastructure and public facilities, and most of the people are involved in agriculture and these conditions affect the incidence of diseases and health problems in the areas.

Overall, Osman said the health status of the people of Sabah is equivalent to the population in Peninsular Malaysia and this is reflected by the decline in death rates of infants, children and mothers in the state in line with the mortality rates in Peninsular Malaysia.

"This shows that Sabah has achieved an excellent

health status in a period of not more than 50 years," he said when delivering his talk entitled Rural Health, The Way Forward.

Osman strongly believes that health transformation is one of the critical components to achieve Vision 2020, where it states Malaysia to be a nation of healthy individuals, families and communities through a health system that is equitable, affordable, efficient, technologically appropriate, and environmentally adaptable and consumer friendly, with emphasis on quality, innovation, health promotion and respect for human dignity.

The government, he said, has invested heavily in research and development under the Ninth Malaysia Plan, with an allocation of RM90 million to the Health Ministry and additional grants allocated to universities as well as for biotechnology.

"Malaysia's wealth in biodiversity should yield medicinal and therapeutic benefits that would place the nation at the forefront of drug discovery and development," said Osman.

Research in rural health should be conducted with a view to improving the health status and quality of life of rural population.

"Inequities and inequalities in health care provision still persist in many countries. The disparity between developing and developed nations and between the urban and rural population is a real issue and challenge in health care delivery," said Osman.