



Some head overseas for greener pastures

PETALING JAYA: The passion to continue in the field of medicine is driving some contract doctors who were not offered permanent postings to serve under the Health Ministry to seek greener pastures overseas.

Others are seeking their true calling outside the medical sector.

Dr Angie Lim, who belonged to one of the early batches of contract medical officers after the system was introduced in 2016, said she moved to the United States to pursue her dream of becoming a specialist after she was not offered a permanent position.

“There is no guarantee of a permanent position for contract doctors in Malaysia. Even if an extension is given for the contract, it doesn’t guarantee a future,” said Dr Lim, who is now based in Rochester, Minnesota.

However, Dr Lim said she has more opportunities in clinical research in the United States, which makes her career more interesting.

“There are better prospects as there are more sub-speciality fields here and it’s research-focused. Working conditions are generally healthier with respect to working hours limits,” she added.

Moving to the US state of Massachusetts has enabled Dr Anand (not his real name), a former contract medical officer, to pursue his dream of becoming a specialist.

He said there was a lack of progress in career pathways in Malaysia and it was even harder for those who wanted to further pursue a parallel pathway by themselves.

Another doctor who recently moved to Australia said the training and education that he received there was better.

“The pay is better and the work-life balance is healthier here,” he said.

A former contract medical officer himself, the doctor said it was difficult for those whose contracts were not renewed to pursue a career at private hospitals, especially when they do not have specialist training.

Apart from that, the long working hours, which could stretch up to 36 hours, had taken a toll on doctors.

He added that the implications of losing doctors from government service will only be known in the years to come, as the patient load may be too much to handle.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, another junior doctor who recently moved to the United States said it was difficult to raise money to move and survive there.

“I wish I could just stay on and serve in Malaysia. But it is not possible without a permanent post, and as we know, it takes years to study medicine.

“After toiling so hard, it will be heartbreaking to leave the field and do something else,” said the doctor from Melaka.

She had to take out loans to fund her move and further her training in the United States.

Dr JY Seah, 31, was a contract medical officer but felt lost during his time with the Health Ministry and wanted to explore more options outside clinical medicine.

“But there were not many choices at the time, and all the focus was on the Covid-19 pandemic,” said Dr Seah.

One day, a startup company gave him the chance to attend an interview.

“I didn’t think twice about taking up the opportunity and joined the company after that.

“I’m working as a general practitioner now, but with some exposure to the health tech industry because my company is a health tech startup,” said Dr Seah.

He is happier now and has better job satisfaction.

His advice to other doctors considering a career change would be to discover their interests and to “go for it”.

“Clinical medicine is just a small part of the healthcare industry. There are many more career options outside clinical service,” he said.

Dr J. Amalaraj, 28, left his post as a contract medical officer at the end of 2021 and is currently pursuing his Master's degree in Public Health.

In the future, he might consider doing something else besides clinical service.

While working as a doctor is a rewarding job, he felt that the outlook and the career prospects in general are driving Malaysian doctors to consider alternatives.

"We do not have a well-supported specialty path.

"There is a huge influx of doctors and the human resources management involves relocating doctors to locations far from their families and homes with limited options to defer or appeal," he said.

Dr Amalaraj believes that doctors are an untapped pool of resources who can acquire additional skills such as coding, marketing or business to supplement their medical knowledge to delve into industries that bridge both worlds together.

"Doing something other than that was not even a possibility. But I believe that there are a lot of talented minds that are good at public speaking, writing, app development, or even graphic design.

"I encourage more young health professionals to look beyond just the 14-plus specialties we were trained for in medical schools and see how disciplines outside of medicine can make doctors more equipped to tackle big public health challenges, just like what Covid-19 has proven," he said.

The future of many contract doctors continues to be uncertain, with only 3,215 contract medical officers having received permanent posts as of Aug 16.

On July 20, it was reported that a Health Ministry circular announced that contract medical officers who do not get permanent posts six months after their application are free to leave the system.

All affected contract medical officers may now apply for a reduction, suspension or exemption from their compulsory service.

This implies that more contract medical officers will be flooding the job market soon.