

More to get more help with their medical bills

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Singapore - More patients can expect greater help with their medical bills, even as the Government plans to boost healthcare infrastructure and manpower in the next five years.

Low-income households and needy retirees with limited funds in their Medisave accounts are among the groups the Government will be looking at to provide a better social safety net for. This is to ensure that Singaporeans can continue to afford the healthcare that they need.

To that end, the Ministry of Health (MOH) will explore expanding the subsidies for medication and outpatient care, according to its addendum to President Tony Tan's speech during Monday's opening of Parliament.

More Singaporeans will also be brought under the MediShield scheme - such as the very old, very young with congenital conditions, and those with psychiatric conditions.

Setting out the broad strokes of its strategies - promoting better health, better care and better value for Singaporeans - the ministry says its vision is to "enable all Singaporeans to live well, live long and enjoy peace of mind".

With a rapidly-ageing population requiring new care models, the MOH is also exploring expanded portable subsidies for both private primary care and charity-based long-term care sectors, in partnership with the public healthcare sector.

"Private acute hospitals will have a greater role in serving the subsidised healthcare needs of Singaporeans," the ministry said in its nine-page addendum yesterday.

It will "significantly" step up investments in social care facilities such as home care and family support services, while manpower will be recruited and trained to cater to the aging sector.

Dr Chia Shi Lu, a member in the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Health, felt that the emphasis on primary care would allow patients to tap on existing resources within the community.

"Singapore is trying to come to a marriage between a state-funded system and a private system," Dr Chia said.

"(The) benefits include tapping on existing resources, as there is a lot of infrastructure out there. That's also the easiest way to increase capacity."

The MOH is also relooking means testing, introduced in 2009 in public hospitals here. It said in the addendum that: "While continuing to target subsidies, we will rationalise and streamline the means-testing approaches.

"We will consider how to contain exceptionally high bills to give patients peace of mind."

Patients with chronic diseases are another group that the MOH will be boosting support for. The capabilities and capacity of the intermediate and long-term care sector will be expanded, as well as the development of the primary care sector, such as general practitioners.

One key approach is to train and increase manpower. For a start, the MOH said the local medical intake at the new Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine would be increased, and more scholarships offered for the healthcare sector.

Diploma holders in the field of allied health will also get a chance to upgrade, with a new degree programme offered by the Singapore Institute of Technology. The MOH also said it wants to "bring more overseas Singapore professionals home".

Dr Muhammad Faishal, who sits on the GPC for Health, felt the ministry's plans would "imply that the budget for healthcare would increase", as the Government brings in private hospitals and ramps up the primary healthcare sector.

But he noted a challenge would be to provide sufficient manpower to meet the increased needs. "The ministry would have to find out how to incentivise Singaporeans to come back to serve," Dr Faishal said, adding that in the long term, this is preferable to recruiting foreign medical manpower.

Over the past five years, the ministry has added more than 700 public acute and community hospital beds, and it has increased the number of doctors, nurses and allied health professionals by more than 50 per cent.

URL <http://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/EDC111013-0000216/More-to-get-more-help-with-their-medical-bills>