

BUDGET 2026 WISH LIST



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MMA calls for bold reforms

► 'Priority to address shortages, retention issues in public healthcare workforce'

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PETALING JAYA: The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has unveiled its wishlist for Budget 2026, calling for bold reforms in healthcare financing, workforce retention, digitalisation and elderly care, adding that health must be viewed as an investment, not an expenditure.

Its president Datuk Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo said Malaysia must double its public healthcare spending from the current 2.4% to 5% of the GDP to meet rising demands and close critical service gaps.

To fund this, the MMA proposed removing the sugar subsidy and expanding the sugar tax on sweetened drinks, with the revenue ring-fenced for the Health Ministry.

"This not only discourages unhealthy consumption but also strengthens our healthcare system."

He also suggested raising registration fees at public clinics, from RM1 to RM5 for primary care and from RM5 to RM25 at specialist outpatient clinics, with proceeds



Thirunavukarasu recommended funding preventive screenings in private clinics and outsourcing health checks for civil servants, university entrants and national immunisation programmes to private GPs. — MASRY CHE ANI/THESUN

channelled into facility maintenance, while maintaining B40 exemptions.

He said the most urgent priority for Budget 2026 is addressing severe shortages and retention challenges in the public healthcare workforce.

He welcomed the government's move to abolish the contract doctor system and urged that all remaining contract doctors be absorbed into permanent positions.

"Without a strong workforce, even the best policies cannot be delivered effectively," he said, adding that on-call allowances for doctors should

be raised from RM9.16 to RM25 per hour to reflect their workload.

To ensure fair distribution of healthcare personnel nationwide, he proposed creating a national dashboard to map healthcare workers, facilities and resources across the country.

"This would allow better planning, transparency and workload management."

He also urged that digitalisation be made a central pillar of healthcare reform.

"It is unacceptable that some

hospitals still have 'dead zones' without phone connectivity." He called for nationwide standardisation of patient ID stickers to reduce errors, and for improvements to the MySejahtera app to provide more personalised care while mapping private GP clinics participating in public-private collaborations.

Thirunavukarasu said Budget 2026 should offer more grants for clinics, pharmacies and dental practices to support digital upgrades under the 13th Malaysia Plan, adding that such investments would modernise healthcare delivery and strengthen patient continuity.

Citing that non-communicable diseases cost Malaysia an estimated RM64.2 billion in 2021, or 4.2% of GDP, largely from productivity loss, he said prevention must be made a national priority.

He recommended funding preventive screenings in private clinics and outsourcing health checks for civil servants, university entrants and national immunisation programmes to private GPs.

"This would ease pressure on public facilities while maintaining secure record-keeping through MySejahtera."

He also called for stronger policies to promote healthy living, including mandatory calorie labelling at food outlets, healthier school meals and tax relief for Malaysians adopting active lifestyles through gym

memberships or sports activities.

With elderly care costs projected to reach RM21 billion by 2040, Thirunavukarasu said Budget 2026 must start preparing for an ageing population.

He proposed greater investment in home-based care, more geriatric and palliative specialists and upgrades to hospitals and clinics with age-friendly facilities.

Financial support for seniors, including subsidies, micro-insurance and caregiver training, should also be expanded.

To address manpower shortages and wait times, he suggested offering tax incentives for private hospitals to lend diagnostic equipment after office hours and formalising GP-health clinic-hospital clusters under a dedicated fund.

He also called for a review of the outdated PHFSA Act to improve governance and integration between public and private sectors.

He said the Covid-19 pandemic proved that collaboration works.

"GP-MOH cooperation delivered one of the highest vaccination rates in the world. That success must be replicated in our national health programmes."

"With fairer funding, stronger partnerships and better planning, Malaysia could save billions in productivity losses while improving quality of life. Health is not an expenditure, it is an investment in the nation's future."

Healthcare system needs shift towards prevention, equity: Expert

PETALING JAYA: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak public health expert Prof Dr Helmy Hazmi said Malaysia's healthcare system needs an urgent shift towards prevention and equity, especially in East Malaysia.

He added that health challenges cannot be solved by hospital expansion alone.

"Where you live should not determine if you live. Allocations must reach the unreached," he said, calling for a rethink of how health resources are distributed.

He outlined three priorities: prevention and primary care, workforce support and greater state-level autonomy.

He said Malaysia must "shift resources upstream", moving from hospital-based treatment to community and preventive care, as envisioned in the Health White Paper.

He also said for Sarawak, this means strengthening rural clinics, expanding mobile services and scaling up telehealth, adding that accelerating digitalisation would create a more efficient network.

Helmy said the second priority is retaining healthcare workers through permanent posts, housing, allowances and family support.

"Health workers are not just individuals on the frontlines. Their families, who are their immediate support system, must also be considered," he told *theSun*.

He also called for greater autonomy for Sarawak in financing, workforce planning and service delivery to ensure policies reflect local realities.

He added that non-communicable diseases (NCD) such as diabetes and hypertension remain Malaysia's

biggest long-term burden.

"Prevention always costs less than cure," he said. "We do not lack foresight or policy frameworks, only the courage and political will to act."

He said policies such as the sugar tax and tobacco control, although slow to take shape, are showing results and must be strengthened. He also urged scaling up nationwide interventions such as hypertension screening and salt reduction.

He added that at the core of lasting reform lies sustainable health financing. Malaysia's total health spending has stayed at about 4% to 5% of GDP for a decade, with only 2% to 3% from public expenditure, among the lowest in Southeast Asia.

"Thailand spends about 3.7% and Vietnam about 3.5% of GDP on public health, both higher than Malaysia."

While the World Health

Organisation recommends at least 5%, Helmy proposed a realistic stepwise increase.

"A practical goal would be 2.9% to 3% next year, signalling we are serious about reaching 5% by 2030," he said, adding that sustainability also requires structural reform and innovative financing, not just bigger budgets.

To bridge the urban-rural divide, he proposed three steps:

- ➡ Upgrade and equip facilities, particularly in Sarawak and Sabah, where geography remains a major barrier.
- ➡ Offer stronger incentives for healthcare workers, including rural and on-call allowances and family-friendly measures.
- ➡ Invest in preventive and primary care, such as NCD screening and maternal health outreach, to enable

early detection and cut costly complications.

He said the next decade must focus on healthcare financing reform, including a stronger *takaful* or insurance framework for middle-income earners.

He also said if the government were to introduce a policy in 2026, it should be "equity-weighted primary care funding", in which allocations are based on community needs.

"Rural Sarawak should finally get the same chance at health as Kuala Lumpur. Such funding would mean better primary care, fewer preventable admissions and more motivated health workers.

"Health equity is not just a goal but a duty. Reform starts with the client's experience and builds the system around what truly matters."

— by **Kirtinee Ramesh**

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VAPING in Malaysia has grown far beyond a passing trend. Once marketed as a "safer" alternative to cigarettes, it has entrenched itself in two key demographics: the youth and the working class.

Cheap devices, an endless range of flavoured juices and a culture of accessibility have made vaping a lifestyle accessory as much as a nicotine delivery system.

Statistics may vary, but anecdotal evidence paints a clear picture. From school toilets to workplace canteens, the vape has become an everyday sight. Teenagers as young as 13 are reported to be experimenting with it, while blue-collar and entry-level white-collar workers often see it as a cheaper and more socially acceptable fix compared to cigarettes. Aggressive marketing, sleek gadgets and candy-like flavours have only deepened its hold.

The Health Ministry's recent announcement that Malaysia is aiming to implement a total vape ban by mid-2026 marks the latest chapter in a long-running saga. Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad's insistence that "the question is no longer if we ban vaping, but when" signals urgency. Yet, the phased approach, starting with open-system vapes and eventually expanding to all products, reflects hesitation.

Addiction dilemma

For young Malaysians, the short-term effects of vaping are already visible. Teachers report declining concentration in classrooms, while parents observe changes in mood and dependency.

The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has sounded



A variety of vape devices, which will face a phased nationwide ban by 2026.

State of **vaping** in Malaysia

➤ Nationwide prohibition faces hurdles as youth addiction, working class dependency grow



Health advocates warn of long-term effects, as young Malaysians already show signs of dependency.



There is rising concern over youth addiction to vaping in Malaysia.

— ALL PICS FROM 123RF

alarm bells, noting that even children as young as eight can identify vape juices. Cases of lung injury linked to e-cigarettes, as well as the disturbing rise of drug-laced vapes, have added urgency to the warnings.

Among the working class, the device plays a dual role. On one hand, it is seen as a stress reliever during long shifts and a cheaper alternative to cigarettes in the short term. On the other hand, the constant need to refill, recharge and restock juices perpetuates a cycle of dependency. In both demographics, the short-term relief masks long-term harm, from respiratory complications to the risk of transitioning to more dangerous substances.

Postponing the ban, critics argue, only prolongs this harm. MMA president Dr R Thirunavukarasu called the delay "unacceptable", stressing that public health cannot afford "another year of preventable harm." Every month without regulation risks more young Malaysians being hooked for life.

Health, economy, culture

The long-term health effects of vaping mirror those of traditional smoking, with added complications due to unregulated ingredients. Beyond nicotine addiction, Malaysians are now exposed to risks from illicit substances such as fentanyl, which has been detected in local vape devices. Should the trend continue unchecked, Malaysia may face a generation grappling with chronic health conditions, increased hospital admissions and spiralling public healthcare costs.

Economically, the vaping industry represents a paradox. On one side, it

has created jobs, shops and a tax revenue stream. On the other, the future cost of treating vape-related illnesses will dwarf short-term gains. For the working class, the cycle of spending on vape paraphernalia perpetuates financial strain, making it less of a savings alternative and more of a hidden expense.

Culturally, vaping has normalised nicotine use in spaces once free of smoke. Cafes, colleges and even family gatherings now witness clouds of flavoured vapour. Unlike the stigma attached to cigarettes, vaping is often perceived as trendy, even harmless, a perception that could hinder public acceptance of any upcoming ban.

Will it stick?

Malaysia's plan for a phased ban raises hope and scepticism. On paper, starting with open-system devices makes sense: these allow users to refill with unregulated liquids, making them a priority target. Expanding later to cover closed systems would complete the prohibition.

However, history offers caution. Previous attempts to regulate or ban vaping since 2015 faltered due to industry pushback, enforcement challenges and wavering political will. Even now, the health minister admits the timeline depends on cabinet approval, leaving room for delay.

Enforcement also looms as a stumbling block. With thousands of vape shops nationwide and a thriving black market, banning the product outright may push sales underground.

Neighbouring Singapore provides a telling example — despite its strict ban, contraband vapes continue to enter through land and sea checkpoints. Malaysia, with its porous borders and less stringent enforcement record, may face even greater difficulties.



Public frustration grows over the government's decision to delay the vape ban.

Public acceptance will be another test. For youths and workers already dependent, sudden prohibition could spark resistance. Without parallel measures, such as cessation programmes, public education campaigns and accessible healthcare support, the ban may achieve compliance on paper while fuelling underground demand in reality.

Between health, habit

At the heart of Malaysia's vape dilemma lies a clash between health imperatives and entrenched habits. The youth see vaping as modern and fashionable, while the working class view it as a relief and routine. A total ban by mid-2026, if implemented, will be a defining moment for Malaysia's public health policy. But whether it sticks will depend on the government's ability to back prohibition with education, enforcement and empathy.

In the short term, Malaysians will continue to live in limbo, with warnings ringing louder than regulations. In the long term, the choices made today will determine whether the country breaks free from a nicotine-fuelled culture or inherits a public health burden that outlasts any cabinet timeline.



Nutritionist **honoured** with award

➤ Recognition given for lifelong service, charitable work and outstanding contributions

SEREMBAN: Nutrition consultant Dr Tee E. Siong was honoured as the Senior Citizen Icon at the National Level Elderly Day celebration here on Sunday.

Tee, 78, a former Health Ministry Institute for Medical Research nutrition officer, received the award in recognition of his lifelong service, charitable work and outstanding contributions at the community, state, national and international levels.

Still active in several organisations, including the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, the Allied Health Professions Council and the Malaysian Elderly Health Awareness Society, Tee continues to advance the field of nutrition through voluntary policy work, community



Nancy (second, left), along with Noraini (centre) presenting the award to Tee at the National Level Elderly Day celebration. – **BERNAMAPIC**

programmes and public education.

The Seremban-born expert also leads numerous initiatives for women, children and the wider community, among them the Positive Healthy Ageing Programme launched in 2022 to promote healthy lifestyles and empower senior citizens to remain active contributors to their families and the nation.

The Senior Citizen Icon Award was presented by Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri, who also officiated the closing ceremony of the celebration, Bernama reported.

Also present were her deputy Datuk Seri Dr Noraini Ahmad, the ministry's secretary-general Datuk Dr

Maziah Che Yusoff and Community Welfare Department director-general Datuk Che Murad Sayang Ramjan.

Speaking to reporters afterwards, Tee expressed gratitude for the recognition and hope that it would inspire other senior citizens to remain active and continue contributing to society.

"In any field, including healthcare, senior citizens must continue to contribute. Even in our later years, we could still play a valuable role. We should not just sit quietly at home. Maintaining our health is crucial so that we could stay active in old age," he said.

Earlier, Nancy said this year's Elderly Day theme, "Senior Citizens, The Face of Our Future," serves as a reminder that the elderly should be celebrated not only for their past contributions, but also for their ongoing roles and as an inspiration to younger generations.

She said the celebration, organised by the Social Welfare Department, carried a clear message that senior citizens represent a shared future for all Malaysians.

She expressed hope that the culture of respecting the elderly and cherishing the young would continue

to flourish.

Meanwhile, the Elopura Senior Citizens Activity Centre in Sandakan, Sabah received the Excellent Pawe Award for its active involvement in volunteer and community programmes and its dedication to improving the wellbeing of senior citizens from all backgrounds.

The Subang Jaya City Council (Selangor), Kulim Municipal Council (Kedah) and Kuala Pilah District Council (Negeri Sembilan) were also presented with the Prihatin Warga Emas (Elderly Care) certificate of appreciation in the local authorities category.

In the statutory body and corporate category, certificates of appreciation went to the Employees Provident Fund, Mydin Mohamed Holdings Bhd and 99 Speedmart Sdn Bhd for their commitment to corporate social responsibility initiatives benefiting senior citizens.

A two-day Senior Citizens' Carnival was also held in conjunction with the celebration at the Negeri Sembilan Youth and Sports Complex, drawing more than 3,000 participants, including members of Elopura Senior Citizens Activity Centres nationwide.

By EDWARD RAJENDRA
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BRISK walking is an extremely good way to achieve a healthy heart, says Klang mayor Datuk Abd Hamid Hussain.

"It is free, requires no special equipment and can be done by people of all ages and fitness levels," he said after launching the Klang Heart Health Carnival 2025 at Taman Rakyat Recreational Park in Taman Seri Andalas.

It was held to mark World Heart Day themed "Don't Miss A Beat" in partnership with Bukit Tinggi Medical Centre (BTMC).

It highlighted the importance of preventing premature death from cardiovascular disease.

"Residents must aim for moderate-intensity exercise at least daily through 10 to 30-minute walks," said Abd Hamid.

About 300 people attended the event which saw senior citizens enthusiastically joining a Zumba session by instructor Azri Abu Bakar.

Another activity saw 14 students from Hin Hua High School, led by their scoutmaster Soh Shao Qi, taking part in a litter cleanup around the park.

The carnival featured a wide range of health-focused activities such as free health screenings, medical talks by specialists, interactive exhibitions, fitness activities and wellness booths.

BTMC chief executive officer Norliza Razali said the centre aimed to raise health awareness among the community.

She also is a firm believer that people should integrate brisk walking into their lives.

"It would be good to park further away and walk to your favourite coffee shop, or use walking as an active form of commuting," she said.

'Put heart into brisk walking for better health'

Mayor urges Klang folk to engage in moderate-intensity exercise daily



Klang folk taking part in an energetic dance session and (right) brisk walking at the Klang Heart Health Carnival.



A participant happily pushing the pedals of a blender bike to make fruit juice.



Abd Hamid (seated) checking his blood pressure during the carnival.



Norliza believes better health starts with brisk walking.