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Ministry wants more schools to join healthy meals programme

By Amalia Azmi - August 6, 2024 @ 4:56pm



PUTRAJAYA: Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad said that the Ministry is encouraging schools to participate in the Healthy Meals Programme (HiTS), introduced in 2013, to address the issue of malnutrition among schoolchildren. — BERNAMA

PUTRAJAYA: The Health Ministry is encouraging schools to participate in the Healthy Meals Programme (HiTS), introduced in 2013, to address the issue of malnutrition among schoolchildren.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad has also encouraged parents to support the scheme, which aims to provide pupils with balanced and nutritious meals at school.

"The Supplementary Food Programme (RMT) is fully funded by the government, whereas HiTS relies on voluntary payments from parents.

"The Health Ministry and Education Ministry will offer a standardised monthly menu for pupils, ensuring balanced meals based on the quarter-quarter-half concept.

"We welcome the involvement of schools in implementing this programme to ensure children receive nutritious food," he said at a press conference following the launch of the "First 1,000 Days of Life" strengthening programme.

Dzulkefly said currently, 210 schools across the country have adopted HiTS, with the highest implementation in Johor.

He said the initiative was a collaborative effort between the Education Ministry and Health Ministry, working with other strategic partners.

He said they will continue to intensify and strengthen the implementation of the programme.

"Stunting needs to be addressed during the first 1,000 days of a child's life.

"This is crucial because evidence-based medicine shows that stunting and related issues should be tackled during this period.

"The first 1,000 days, include the nine months of pregnancy, followed by the first 365 days and the second 365 days of a child's life, focusing on food and micronutrients, as well as psychological stimulation for children," he said.

He said malnutrition was not confined to low-income groups but was also prevalent among higher-income families.

"Maybe they are rich, but they are not feeding them (the children) well.

"Even if they have high incomes, they might not provide a proper balanced diet to their children, which can lead to stunting," he said.

When asked about the possibility of extending maternity and paternity leave to parents, Dzulkefly said the ministry would continue to evaluate the matter.

"Policies can't be changed every month, as it has to be guided by evidence.

"If there are peer-reviewed studies or solid research published in journals (that suggest so), the ministry will seriously consider proposing new policies or amending existing ones," he said.

Based on the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2022, stunting affects 1 in 5 (21.2 per cent) of children in Malaysia.

NHMS2022 also showed that 6.8 per cent of adolescents were stunted.

Stunted children tend to fall sick more often, miss opportunities to learn, perform less well in school, and have lower self-esteem.

They are also at risk of becoming stunted in adulthood — a condition associated with an increased risk of chronic diseases, decreased economic productivity and lower lifetime earning potential.