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## HEALTHCARE BILL

# Doctors on the warpath

Dissidents hold 'secret' meeting to plan battle against govt reforms

■ *The Nation*

**A** GROUP OF 30 dissident doctors at a number of provincial state hospitals is spearheading a plan to mobilise support from doctors nationwide to oppose the government's universal health insurance bill, according to two doctor sources.

The bill is being deliberated in the Senate. The doctors, who requested anonymity at this stage for fear of being reprimanded by their political superiors, held a "secret" meeting on Friday to discuss the plan.

Besides doctors, health officials at major government-run hospitals in a central province also joined the gathering. At the Friday meeting, it was concluded that the group would inform doctors and health officials in other provinces about the pros and cons of the controversial bill so that they can protect their rights before the bill is passed into law.

"We're quite confident that when they know exactly how they would be affected by the law, a mass protest will occur," said one source who is the director of a provincial hospital. The second source is a provincial doctor.

"About 90 per cent of doctors here have never read details of the proposed legislation. They're unaware of what will happen to them," said the hospital director.

The Bt30-per-visit healthcare programme, which comes under the

### Panic room

Doctors are not known for being vocal, unless it comes to the national healthcare system. Dr Chotchuang Chutinthorn's recent attack on the scheme is just the tip of the iceberg.

Dive below the surface and the noise is deafening. Try the Doctor's Room of [www.thaiclinic.com](http://www.thaiclinic.com), a website well visited by doctors.

Most doctors seem to agree on the benefits of universal health coverage, but almost all express doubts about its long-term financial viability under the Thai Rak Thai Party's Bt30 scheme.

Although concern about the scheme and patient welfare is genuine - one entry says the plan has sparked a war among doctors - the Doctor's Room is also a rare example of a doctor's interest group.

Some worry about maintaining income levels, others see a conflict of interest between choosing the best treatment for patients and their fees.

Complaints range from patient overflows and lawsuits-waiting-to-happen to exasperation that doctors are being branded as the bad guys by politicians and a misinformed public.

One doctor says the profession is at its lowest point and several say they are contemplating quitting. Another provides career alternatives: malpractice lawyers or agents selling malpractice insurance.

PAISARN LIKHITPREECHAKUL

universal health-care insurance bill, still has many weaknesses that should be addressed, he said, adding that it would be difficult to make corrections once the bill becomes law.

Despite growing concerns, he said, many doctors at state hospitals are afraid of criticising the bill publicly. "That's why we would like to encourage the quiet to speak out together before it's too late," he said.

The current draft of the universal health insurance bill is vague and there is no guarantee that the existing level of services will not be lowered or that users in future will not have to pay more than Bt30 per visit.

Not only would doctors and health officials suffer, but other groups including bureaucrats, employees under the social security fund and those employed by state

enterprises, as well as the general population, would be affected once the bill is passed, the sources said.

Moreover, the government has been rushing to enact this bill with minimal public hearings, in contrast to the broader National Health bill, which is still in the process of nationwide public hearings, they said.

It would be better to adjust the existing healthcare system than change it completely, the dissident doctors said. Many more doctors will come out publicly once the movement gains momentum, they said.

"They don't see any reason to come out now because that would make the government conclude we're a minority whose interest has been hit," the hospital director said.

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