

Future of ageing population



As the extended family structure goes out of fashion, a 2010 study showed that one out of three elderly people was abandoned by their children.

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IT is said with age comes wisdom. However, along with a rapidly ageing population also comes complex health, social and economic implications.

According to a 2015 United Nations World Population Prospects report, there would be over 900 million people worldwide aged above 60 by the end of that year and the figure was expected to double by 2050.

This issue is particularly prominent in East Asia and the Pacific which is ageing faster than any other region. In fact, the older population in East Asia is estimated to grow by about 22 per cent every five years between 2015 and 2034.

In Malaysia, the total population, as of 2017, was about 32.3 million with the ageing population around 6.2 per cent.

Although the current rate might appear insignificant, the nation's ageing population has actually been steadily increasing. By 2020, 10 per cent of the population will be above the age of 60 and by 2050, the percentage of the people in that age group will have increased to

23.6 per cent.

Despite the improvement in healthcare delivery services, the increase in the ageing population has placed much strain on the healthcare sector as costs rise in tandem with economic growth.

Addressing the ageing issues in Malaysia, Health Ministry deputy director-general (medical) Datuk Seri Dr Jeyaindran Sinnadurai said not only are Malaysians ageing rapidly, they are ageing unhealthily. "On average, Malaysians above the age of 60 suffer from two to three non-communicable diseases (NCD) such as hypertension, diabetes and obesity; that is already a burden to the healthcare sector."

He also pointed out that if those diseases are not caught and treated at an early stage, it could lead to a more severe health issues such as kidney failure. As a result, Dr Jeyaindran said, the government spends almost half-a-billion-ringgit a year on dialysis alone.

"This can be prevented if people were to adopt good lifestyle habits such as eating healthily, staying active and attending regular medical screenings," he said at the Malaysia's Ageing Population and the Value of Health Innovation forum recently. The forum, held to



Dr Philip George says ageing is an area of life that is often overlooked in Malaysia. — Picture by Zuraneza Zulkifli



The gradual improvement in healthcare delivery services has increased life expectancy and percentage of the elderly population.

promote healthy ageing, was organised by the Malaysian Healthy Ageing Society (MHAS) in partnership with Bayer Co. (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd.

According to a report by the Department of Statistics, Malaysians have a better life expectancy now. Based on a recent report, Malaysian women who celebrated their 65th birthdays last year were expected to live for another 17.1 years. "This higher life expectancy is a result of healthcare advancements today when compared with what was available 50 years ago," said Dr Jeyaindran.

That said, he added, there is still much to be done to combat the rising incidence of NCDs which results in more people ageing unhealthily and living longer in ill health. "An ageing population tends to have a higher prevalence of chronic diseases, physical disabilities and mental illnesses."

Echoing the same sentiment, MHAS president Prof Dr Philip George said ageing is an area of life that is often overlooked in Malaysia. "Infrastructure, work opportunities, mobility, finances, family support and healthcare facilities are among some of the important areas that require change to help meet the expected needs of a growing ageing population," he said.

Dr George pointed out that the gradual demographic shift in Malaysia has also resulted in changes of disease pattern and age structure of the population.

According to him, the longer life expectancy is accompanied by a wave of NCDs and increased susceptibility to disabilities. "In 2013, cancers and cardiovascular diseases topped the chart as among the 10 leading causes of death. In addition, NCDs are also the leading cause of hospitalisation in both private and government hospitals," he said.

Unlike most developed countries, said Dr George, family has always been the fundamental source of support for the elderly in many Asian countries. However, this extended family structure which is the core in elderly care in

Malaysia, is fading out.

"In 2010, the nuclear family household constituted about 62.8 per cent of households in Malaysia, while the extended family household stood at about 20.5 per cent," he said.

"But with declining fertility rates, smaller families, longer life expectancy, special care need for the elderly, higher cost of living, increased participation of women in the labour force and migration to distant places for work, it has become taxing and untenable for families to support their elderly relatives."

As a result, a survey conducted by the National Population and Family Development Board in 2010 found that one out of three elderly people was abandoned, without financial support from their children.

Recognising the challenges the country might face as the elderly population grows, Bayer is focused on driving scientific innovation to address unmet medical needs of the ageing population such as reducing hospitalisation as well as improving health and wellbeing as we increase the independence of older people.

"Health innovation such as innovative medicines and healthcare technologies plays an important role in addressing the challenges in our ageing societies and transforming the health outcomes of older people living with chronic diseases," said Bayer Co (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd country head division (consumer health division) Leong Sook Fun.

She said 50 per cent of the complications in diabetes can now be prevented with treatment. "In many cases today cancer does not have to be a death sentence as two out of three people diagnosed with cancer now survive for at least five years.

"Innovative therapeutic options can make it possible for cancer patients to live with the disease," Leong said, adding that such innovations make it possible for older people to live a high-quality life that is active, productive and independent.



Dr Jeyaindran says there is still much to be done to combat the rising incidence of NCDs which results in more people ageing unhealthily. — Picture by Zuraneza Zulkifli



Healthy ageing practices will help reduce morbidity and dependence.