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With birth rates falling, people past their retirement age may be called upon to remain in the workforce

Healthy ageing at the workplace

SENIOR citizens will soon outnumber young people. Globally, the ageing population is growing at an unprecedented rate, thanks largely to better healthcare and a falling birth rate.

The phenomenon is most significant in places such as Japan, Singapore, the United States and across Europe, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Malaysia is heading in the same direction. Our country will become an ageing nation by 2035 when up to 15% of the total population falls under the "senior citizens" category.

According to Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim, up to 5.6 million Malaysians will be aged 60 and above by 2035.

At the Dewan Rakyat last year, Rohani said her ministry had taken measures to prepare for the challenges of an ageing nation by ensuring that there are adequate healthcare services. That would include proper infrastructure for senior citizens.

The growing number of older people can be attributed to a longer life expectancy. The average Malaysian now lives 12 to 17 years more after retirement. The official retirement age is 60.

Life expectancy is rising and, as a result, the ageing population is growing. It is imperative that businesses be prepared to engage an increasingly older workforce



by HAN KAR KAY

The average life expectancy for men is 72.5 years and that for women is 77.4 years. This is a slight improvement over the 71.9 years average for men and 76.6 years for women recorded in the 1990s.

But addressing the issue of an aged nation is not confined to providing for their well-being. Increasingly, with birth rates falling, people past their retirement age may be called upon to remain in the workforce, making it essential for businesses to also prepare for a time when seniors make up a large portion of their workforce.

Health issues

One of the biggest issues attached to ageing is health. For businesses, a worker who constantly falls ill is not

► Continues on page 12



Sapna says employers have a responsibility to cater to the needs of seniors in their workforce

Alternative care for senior citizens

AS a nation ages, the need for specialist care rises. One nation that has responded to this need is Singapore, where home care services have become increasingly popular.

Under the service, senior citizens continue to reside in their own homes as opposed to being sent to an elderly care facility. Trained healthcare workers would visit them to attend to their medical and health needs.

This may soon become a necessity in Malaysia. Taylor's University School of Medicine senior lecturer Dr Sapna S Patil expresses concern that the country is still not prepared for a future with an ageing population.

To ensure proper care, the healthcare system must be transformed,

she says. "Existing facilities are fragmented and disconnected. For instance, if I have high blood pressure, I may end up being seen by a physician," she says. "On the other hand, the contributing factor may actually be stress at work, which means I may also have anxiety attacks and therefore need a psychiatrist."

She says the elderly are less mobile so having to go to the hospital frequently would pose a problem.

To resolve this issue, Sapna says, there needs to be integrated care for the elderly such as having a geriatric medicine specialist specially trained to care for senior citizens.

"It is relatively new in Malaysia. Currently, there are plenty of healthcare facilities catered specifically to women and children," she says. "However, there is no such facility for the elderly. Hence, the elderly should be recognised as a special group of people with special care needs."

Geriatrics is a specialty to evaluate the healthcare needs and treatment

preferences of older people.

Healthcare for senior citizens will continue to gain importance. The United Nations estimates that Malaysia's older population will reach 9.7 million by 2050.

While the government has a duty to ensure the citizenry has access to good healthcare, it is also up to the individual to practise a healthy lifestyle. But, says Sapna, many people continue to neglect their personal health.

Preparing for an ageing nation

In less than 20 years, more than 15% of Malaysians will be aged 60 and above. The Malaysian Ageing Research Institute has identified issues and formulated strategies to prepare the nation to deal with a high population of senior citizens.

Apart from health issues, an aged nation will have an impact on the economy as well. Will the Malaysian economy continue to thrive or will it be bogged down by a large number of people who are no longer able to offer a positive contribution?

Australian newspaper *The Age*, in its report *The economics of an ageing population*, says it will have an impact on the national savings as an increase in the number of elderly leads to an increase in the numbers who draw down assets.

Besides, there would be a significant increase in social security and health programmes for the elderly.

If the nation looks at the impact of an ageing population on the workforce, which affects the employees' productivity, then it would make more sense for the employers to look into the comprehensive plan of healthy lifestyle at work, says Dr Sapna.

Malaysian Healthy Ageing Society adviser Prof Nathan Vytialingam says citizens who remain healthy as they age can help the government to cut healthcare expenditure significantly.

"We can choose to age healthily. It begins by having a healthy child who then becomes a healthy teenager, adult and subsequently when he reaches old age," he says.

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Delaying the onset of health issues

► From page 10

good even if he comes with decades of experience. To ensure a healthy workforce, this issue will have to be addressed first.

There are many diseases and chronic symptoms that are most prevalent among the elderly, the most common of which being neurological problems, cardiovascular diseases, injuries from accidents, depression, psychosocial problems and musculoskeletal problems among others, according to a medical journal *Malaysia's Ageing Issues* by JT Arokiasamy of Universiti Malaya.

Similar views were aired by researchers from five Asean countries who attended a workshop on ageing in Hanoi recently. According to them, an ageing population leads to a rise in non-communicable but chronic health problems such as cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

According to the article *The problems and challenges of the ageing population of Malaysia* published in the *Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences*, Alzheimer's disease is a common health problem affecting those aged 65 and above.

Only a healthy lifestyle at a young age can delay or prevent such health issues at an older age. The logic is that a healthy young adult will become a healthy senior citizen.

There are numerous factors that will influence the quality of life and health condition of an older population. They include work conditions, retirement, income, the community and leisure activities.

The journal reiterates the importance of healthy ageing, not only among the elderly but also in other age groups, to prevent the onset of chronic diseases.

Healthy ageing

While ageing is inevitable, one can grow old and continue to be in good health. "All you need is a holistic approach that covers all aspects, including practising healthy habits," says Esther Jara Edmund, assistant secretary of the Asean Conference on Healthy Ageing 2017.

"It is also important to take care of our mental health because the brain is like an engine to our body. There is a saying 'mind over matter'. When you have a healthy mind, everything else will follow suit," she tells *Focusweek*.

But the unfortunate thing is that people start to think about healthy ageing only when they approach retirement.

Taylor's University School of Medicine senior lecturer Dr Sapna S Patil voices similar opinion, saying that healthy ageing is not related to the age of an individual.

"An 80-year-old can be much more active than a 20-year-old if he or she desires to be so," she points out. "Essentially, when we prepare the country for (when it becomes) an aged nation, we should also ensure that the younger generation stays healthy so when they age they will continue to be healthy and so better able to

enjoy quality of life compared with the present generation."

Sapna says healthy ageing is defined as providing optimal opportunities to people for health, economic security, and participation in social and cultural activities to improve their quality of life.

Ageing workforce

The current retirement age of 60 years was introduced in 2012. Nonetheless, many companies continue to retain employees past their retirement age.

Many are retained for their productivity and efficiency, honed over years of experience, which businesses benefit from. For the employee, it means he is still considered an essential part of the workforce, which helps to reduce the sense of uselessness and worthlessness among the elderly.

But to retain an older person in the workforce, one has to ensure that he remains healthy. It is necessary for employers to cater to the needs of the seniors in their workforce, Sapna says. This includes having guidelines on rest time at work and allocation of responsibilities.

Creating a sustainable work condition is also a priority for some industries to ensure the workforce ages healthily.

"For instance, if an employee suffers from a chronic disease, he has to be monitored closely. If it is a factory, regular checks are essential to ensure that exposure to chemicals and toxic substances as well as excessive noise does not exceed the permissible level," Sapna says.

Ultimately, she adds, it is crucial to look at health awareness issues. There must be continuous efforts to raise awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle among employees, whatever their age.

To its credit, the private sector is taking the lead in this. Sapna says there has been an increase in the awareness of health issues among businesses chiefly because productivity and efficiency are important to them.

"Businesses want results, and it makes sense that a reduction in sick days and absenteeism through the promotion of good health will enable employees to perform better," she explains.

Prof Nathan Vytialingam, adviser to the Malaysian Healthy Ageing Society, says organising workshops to educate employees on the importance of well-being can help to create a sustainable work environment.

Addressing common health problems faced by employees such as stress and obesity will help to boost a company's profile, he says.

"Encourage them to seek

solutions. A plus point for any company is to create a sense of belonging, like a family between superiors and subordinates," he adds.

Retaining seniors in the workforce will increasingly be the norm rather than the exception. It pays for businesses to help keep their employees in shape. **Focusweek**

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— Esther Jara Edmund

Towards an age-friendly city

TOYAMA, a mid-size city facing the Sea of Japan, is the model of a perfect age-friendly city.

According to *Monocle* magazine, by 2025, up to 30% of its population will be 65 or older, up from 28% now.

The city is leading the nation to gerontocracy – a state or society that is governed by old people.

Toyama has reinvented itself as a compact city, thanks to mayor Masashi Tori.

Among some of the impressive infrastructure and facilities designed for the elderly people are the public transport system to encourage the elderly to move into the city, a preventative health centre for seniors to encourage older people to join group fitness classes, as well as a day care centre that facilitates interaction between the young and old.

Taylor's University School of Medicine senior lecturer Dr Sapna S Patil says Malaysia ought to focus more on research to develop age-friendly cities or communities here.

She says it can be done by building proper infrastructure, having more day care centres that function like "laugh clubs" for the elderly, and ensuring that the healthcare facilities are affordable, accessible and of quality.

The Malaysia Healthy Ageing Society has proposed and is currently in talks with several quarters to turn one of the cities in Malaysia into an age-friendly city for the old people.

"The purpose is not to change the city but to fully utilise whatever that is already in the city to make it age-friendly for the elderly," says Esther Jara Edmund, assistant secretary Asean Conference on Healthy Ageing 2017.

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