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## Beating Malaysia's top preventable diseases

OF late, universal access to health-care has been widely discussed and examined, but prevention is indisputably better than cure where health is concerned.

Lifestyle choices have a significant impact on our susceptibility to chronic diseases such as heart and lung disease, cancer and diabetes. These so-called non-communicable diseases (NCDs) – also known as lifestyle diseases – are responsible for nearly 70% of deaths globally. Ischaemic heart disease tops the cause of deaths worldwide, followed by stroke while chronic obstructive airways disease (a smoking-related chronic lung disease), lung cancer and diabetes are the fourth, fifth and sixth biggest killers respectively.

Data from the Department of Statistics and Health Ministry show that the leading cause of death in Malaysia in 2016 was ischaemic heart disease (13.2%). Other NCDs such as stroke, diabetes, lung cancer and chronic obstructive airways rank among the top 10 causes

of death in this country.

Besides the millions of preventable and premature deaths from NCDs, the economic burden of managing these diseases and their complications is huge and remains a pressing issue globally.

Changes in lifestyle, socio-demographic and economic transition, improved affordability, ease of trade and travel, and urban hunger have contributed significantly to the emergence of NCDs as the leading cause of deaths globally, including in Malaysia.

High blood sugar, raised blood pressure, high level of cholesterol, obesity and physical inactivity have been recognised as the most prevalent (common) risk factors for NCDs which, if recognised and managed efficiently, can help reduce the burden of the diseases.

Consumption of an unhealthy diet comprising few fruits and vegetables, high salt and trans-fats, physical inactivity, tobacco use, and harmful alcohol use are the common "behaviourally modifiable"

risk factors of NCDs.

Prevention of NCDs requires management of the "risk factors" right from the early years of life. The health and social needs of populations should be considered at all stages of the life course, starting from preconception right to adulthood. This needs to be supported by facilities for early detection and treatment of the diagnosed conditions.

Individuals with risk factors who do not have any symptoms must be able to access these healthcare services too.

Dealing with chronic NCDs remains a constant challenge for healthcare providers all over the world. Diseases such as diabetes and heart problems are complex to manage and require concerted efforts by the individual as well as the healthcare system.

Prevention of complications of these diseases significantly reduces mortality and aids in improving the quality of life of the person.

As adults, we must lead by example and start encouraging our chil-

dren to adopt healthy eating habits at home and school, together with being physically active to prevent these lifestyle diseases.

Modifying policies and regulations, which calls for multi-sector collaboration, is key to ensuring reduction of tobacco use and the harmful use of alcohol. Additionally, the response of health services in addressing the related health issues plays a pivotal role.

Mobilisation of available resources remains the cornerstone of prevention. The need of the hour is to create awareness and educate populations on the risk factors as well as their prevention and management.

As a community, let us participate and do our part in changing lifestyles to beat these diseases!

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