

REDUCING RISK OF DEMENTIA

THE World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that there are about 55 million people afflicted with dementia this year.

This figure is expected to reach 78 million in 2030 and 139 million in 2050, with 68 per cent of the affected population living in developing countries.

In Malaysia, the prevalence is 8.5 per cent of the population, slightly higher than the global prevalence rate mainly attributed to the fast-growing rate of the ageing population.

The Alzheimer's Disease Foundation Malaysia (ADFM) estimates the overall cost of dementia care, including the cost of social care and unpaid family care per person with dementia, at RM3,095 per person. This incurs a huge healthcare cost of RM768 million

per year to the nation.

Realising the importance of dementia as a public health priority, in 2017, the WHO endorsed the global action plan 2017 to 2025 on the public health response to dementia.

This plan provides a comprehensive blueprint for action by every member country in addressing dementia, ranging from boosting public awareness of the disease, establishing dementia-friendly initiatives, reducing the risk of dementia, improving diagnosis, treatment and care of dementia patients, support for dementia caregivers, building versatile information systems for dementia, and enhancing research and innovation in dementia care.

In response to this world-wide call for action, Malaysia will have its National Dementia Action Plan by next year.

Although dementia mainly affects elderly people, it is not a normal part of ageing. The reassuring news is that it is preventable. Here are a few measures that can be taken to prevent and reduce the risk of developing dementia.

First, adopt a healthy lifestyle. Every individual should take steps to stop smoking. Eat a healthy and balanced diet as poor nutrition predisposes one to infection. Do regular exercise to improve cardiovascular health.

Cardiovascular diseases, such as stroke and heart attack, have been associated with an increased risk of dementia. And, get a good night's sleep.

Second, manage health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Several studies have found that people with high blood pressure in middle age increased

their risk of having dementia over the next 25 years by 40 per cent. In the case of diabetes, that risk can go up by 80 per cent.

Third, stay mentally and socially active by getting involved in activities and be willing to learn new things as it is also a good preventive measure.

Being an active learner keeps the brain engaged and has beneficial effects on memory and mental processing. Engagement in social activities, including sports, cultural programmes and support groups, is associated with a lower risk of dementia.

Lastly, manage other risk factors of dementia such as hearing loss, depression, loneliness and a sedentary lifestyle. Studies show that by modifying all these risk factors, the risk of dementia can be significantly reduced.

According to ADFM, the existing

legislation and laws in Malaysia are not sufficient to fully protect the lives and rights of older adults with dementia.

However, it is envisaged that greater awareness can help the person with dementia to lead a dignified and quality life. This is because legislation and awareness are important to inspire understanding, recognition and acceptance of dementia as a fast-growing health and socioeconomic concern in our rapidly ageing society.

They also provide opportunities for open dialogue among stakeholders to review health priorities, strategies and to plan for the allocation of resources for elderly healthcare.

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