

Editorial

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Holistic Approach to Combating Non-communicable Diseases in Malaysia

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancer are a significant health burden and public health challenge in Malaysia. A report from the Ministry of Health Malaysia and the World Health Organization reveals that the direct healthcare costs of NCDs, including hospitalizations, medical tests, medications, and primary care consultations, cost the Malaysian economy upwards of RM 9.65 billion annually.¹ Even without the additional threat posed by COVID-19, NCDs are a major cause of death and disability in the country. It is estimated that 1 in 5 adult Malaysians are living with diabetes, 1 in 3 are living with hypertension, and nearly half are overweight or obese. The growing prevalence of NCDs is placing an increased strain on the healthcare system of Malaysia.²

The growing burden of NCDs in Malaysia is compounded by the fact that we have a rapidly aging population in which the failure to address adequately the challenge of NCDs could significantly impact healthcare costs and the economic well-being of the community. Malaysia is expected to reach the status of an aged nation by 2030, with people over the age of 65 making up more than 14% of the population.³ With the population aging, more and more people are expected to live with NCDs. Given this demographic change, the health and economic burden of NCDs can also be expected to increase over time.

Holistic medicine is a philosophy that treats the whole person-body, mind, and spirit-rather than just focusing on the physical symptoms of a particular ailment. This approach recognizes that our overall health and well-being are interconnected and considers the many factors that can impact our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. By adopting a holistic approach to healthcare, we can address the root causes of NCDs and promote healthy lifestyles that can prevent their development.

One of the major advantages of holistic medicine is that it takes into account the unique needs and circumstances of each individual. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, health practitioners should work with patients to develop personalized treatment plans that address the root cause of their health concerns. It is important to recognize that each individual has unique needs and circumstances that must be taken into account when providing care or support. This includes physical, mental, and emotional factors that may impact an individual's ability to cope with a particular situation or challenge. It is also important to be respectful of an individual's autonomy and to involve them in the decision-making process as much as possible. This can help to ensure that the treatment or support provided is effective and meets the needs of the individual in a meaningful way.

While it is important to recognize that holistic medicine is not a substitute for traditional allopathic medicine, it can be a valuable addition to a comprehensive approach to healthcare. By considering the whole person, rather than just their physical symptoms, practitioners of holistic medicine can help patients achieve optimal health and well-being.

There is a wide variety of strategies to help patients achieve and maintain optimal health and well-being. These include nutritional counselling, recommending specific types of exercise or movement, teaching stress management techniques such as meditation or deep breathing, recommending mind-body practices such as mindfulness meditation or yoga, using complementary and alternative therapies such as acupuncture or phytotherapy, and making lifestyle modifications such as improving sleep habits and reducing exposure to toxins. Activities such as learning new languages, pursuing hobbies such as gardening, as well as spending time with friends and

family helps ensure mental well-being. All these are intended to support the natural healing processes and help patients achieve optimal health and well-being of the body.

I personally feel that comprehensive nutritional knowledge is crucial in preventing noncommunicable diseases. Adopting a healthy diet that is rich in fruits, vegetables, high quality carbohydrate, and lean proteins, and avoiding processed and sugary foods, can significantly reduce the risk of developing NCDs. Unfortunately, many amongst us have poor nutritional knowledge and often fall prey to false advertising and blatantly biased information. This inevitably can lead to the consumption of unhealthy diets, which can contribute to the development of NCDs. It is important for healthcare professionals to continuously educate themselves on the latest nutritional research and recommendations, and to base their advice on solid scientific evidence.

Maintaining good health throughout our lives is important for obvious reasons. It allows us to live a full and active life, participate in activities that bring us joy and fulfilment, and enjoy the company of our loved ones. Good health also helps us to be more productive and contribute to our communities and societies. In Islam, good health is considered a blessing from God and taking care of one's health is seen as a religious duty. The Holy Qur'an contain numerous verses and teachings that encourage one to take care of their bodies and to strive for well-being, such as "And do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction. And do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good" (Qur'an 2:195). Another pointedly say "Eat and drink but avoid excesses" (Quran 20:81)

It is important for policymakers and healthcare providers in Malaysia to adopt a holistic approach to the prevention and management of NCDs. By increasing awareness about NCDs and their management among the general population and those at risk, we can contribute to increased longevity and healthy aging in Malaysia through

a reduction of premature mortality due to NCDs and their complications. This can be achieved through collaboration and the implementation of publicly informed, evidence-based policies that support the adoption of healthy lifestyles. By taking a holistic approach to healthcare, we can improve the well-being of individuals, societies, and the economy of Malaysia.

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