

NUS HEALTH FORUM

A pressing need to curb lifestyle diseases



By CHEONG SUK WAI
SENIOR WRITER

IF YOU tell a smoker that his penchant for puffing is killing him slowly but surely, he will likely rattle off names of fellow smokers who have lived long and strong.

That prevailing attitude towards chronic non-communicable diseases (CND) such as lung cancer, says Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, underscores the single biggest challenge to those trying to prevent early deaths from such lifestyle diseases.

Prof Tan, 53, who is president of the National University of Singapore (NUS), says: "These diseases all revolve around behaviour and so... require sustained changes in behaviour, which goes back to how individuals think about health and risks to it."

He told *The Straits Times* this last Tuesday, ahead of his university's yearly public health pow-wow today. Called the NUS Initiative to Improve Health in Asia (Niha), it brings together Asian policymakers, thought leaders and researchers in health care on Asia's most pressing health concerns.

The forum also enables NUS researchers to suss out what they should be working on immediately, and the Niha also provides real-time content for training Asia's younger health policymakers at NUS.

For a start, Prof Tan says, there is a pressing need to communicate the risks of CND better, especially to the young, as CND develops earlier in life, no thanks to readily available calorie-dense foods and temptations like tobacco, as well as a "live for today" mindset.

He muses: "Are there better ways to explain the risk to them, rather than saying you have a one in 15.6 per cent chance of suffering this and that?"

The real rub, he adds, is determining the factors that people bring to bear when weighing up risks to their health, which may range from rational concerns such as financial costs to more quirky considerations such as unfounded fears about even necessary and long-standing medical treatments.

Even today, he notes, no one can quite pinpoint exactly why or how people weigh up different risks and that is, perhaps, because the medical profession has yet to find a way to explain risks intuitively to them.

For example, he adds, measles and mumps can sometimes be life-threatening to young children, and so parents are encouraged to vaccinate their offspring in good time. But a few years ago, one Dr Andrew Wakefield published a study which purportedly found a link between such vaccinations and autism.

That study, published in *The Lancet*, has since been discredited, and retracted by *The Lancet*, as Dr Wakefield was thought to have falsified data in his study. Yet, Dr Tan notes, many parents today still refuse to vaccinate their children because they believe Dr Wakefield.

With \$17 million from the GSK-EDB Trust Fund to spend over the next 10 years on research grants and the like, the Niha aims to contribute integrated solutions to Asia's health-care providers and, more importantly, smoothen and quicken the implementation of those.

As Prof Tan muses: "You can educate somebody but how do we translate that knowledge into positive action and actually promote health?"

Since he launched the Niha in 2010, its high-level participants have come to agree that CND should be the Niha's main focus from now on.

To be sure, he admits, the Niha did not start out with such a focus. But spirited discussions in the past two years or so have convinced its participants that CND is the right crisis on which to train their energies – and this comes at not a moment too soon, as Prof Tan says that Asia's policy wonks are still "very unclear" as to how to stem the rapid rise of CND.

Indeed, he stresses, the surge of sufferers of CND such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease has reached epidemic proportions.

As the World Health Organisation notes, at least 63 per cent of all deaths today are from CND. Worse, nine million of the 36 million people who died of CND in 2010 were 60 years old or younger.

The crisis is now so acute that in September 2010, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly saw fit to convene just to discuss how to tackle CND. That was only the second time in UN history that the assembly had done so for a health issue, after its first such meet on Aids in 2001.

All this means that time is running out for the medical profession to, as Prof Tan puts it, "shift the centre of gravity" from treating individuals to treating whole populations.

That is because what CND sufferers need most is "very meticulous" care to help them control their diseases and modify their lifestyles, and all-round support that is affordable because these diseases stretch over very long periods of time.

So, he says firmly, the Niha is not about "quick wins or silver bullets", but rather to put the health of whole populations firmly at the top of its agenda.

Prof Tan, who was once the director of medical services at the Ministry of Health here, knows that it seems all too obvious that CND needs to be red-flagged for the havoc it can wreak on entire populations in Asia. But he says it is necessary because that seems the only way to persuade regional policymakers to devote more time, money and expertise to it.



NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan says it is important to communicate the risks of chronic non-communicable diseases better, especially to the young, as such diseases develop earlier in life. PHOTO: MARK CHEONG FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

There is an equally pressing need to involve social scientists in hammering out solutions to this crisis, chiefly putting an effective stop to habits that make people susceptible to CND.

For a start, participants at last year's Niha forum learnt through an Niha White Paper by NUS and the Harvard Medical School how various countries use behavioural intervention for Type 2, or non-insulin dependent, diabetes; Singapore, for one, puts its chubbier schoolchildren on regular keep-fit programmes while Sri Lanka makes people use Forkspoons, a type of cutlery with which one scoops up less sugar.

And this year, Niha participants will be encouraged to learn from and mingle with experts from non-medical disciplines at NUS' other ongoing forum, the Global Asia Institute signature conference.

This is because trying to change attitudes to life that encourage the spike in CND requires fresh thinking on all fronts, be it further laws to restrict access to CND-causing indulgences or messages that effectively turn people off those things.

He says: "For so long, we've had such a big focus on clinical or curative medicine, in which we talk about helping individuals get better, but that's not quite the same as treating whole populations."

"But with Niha, we are really trying to foreground public health as a very integral part of managing this epidemic of CND."

suk@sph.com.sg

Professor Tan will be speaking at the Niha forum today and tomorrow.

BETTER COMMUNICATION

Are there better ways to explain the risk to them, rather than saying you have a one in 15.6 per cent chance of suffering this and that?

— Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, president of NUS