

Cancer in Malaysia: Nurturing Awareness, Conquering Late-Stage Challenges



Malaysia faces a challenging struggle against a surge in cancer cases, significantly impacting the country's health landscape. As reported by the Ministry of Health (MOH), the likelihood of receiving a cancer diagnosis stands at 1 in 10 for men and 1 in 9 for women during their lifetime^[1] Alarmingly, more than 63% of diagnoses happen at advanced stages, severely limiting treatment choices and escalating healthcare expenses^[2]

Multiple factors contribute to these late-stage diagnoses. These include insufficient awareness of cancer symptoms, hesitance in seeking early medical help, and the prevalence of misconceptions about the disease.

Recognising the early signs of cancer remains critical. While the wide spectrum of cancer types complicates identifying specific symptoms, general early warning signs encompass unexplained weight loss, persistent fatigue, chronic pain, changes in skin appearance, and alterations in bowel or bladder habits. These indicators should prompt immediate medical attention, urging individuals to seek prompt evaluation^[3]

Vital strategies for early cancer detection

Breast cancer, colorectal cancer, lung cancer, nasopharyngeal cancer, and liver cancer stand as the predominant types in Malaysia, collectively constituting more than half of the diagnosed cases of cancer in the nation^[4]

Given cancer's ability to advance silently, often without noticeable symptoms, routine health screenings become pivotal for detecting the disease at its early stages. Below are several prevalent screening techniques tailored to specific types of cancer:

Vision for comprehensive and accessible treatment

Cancer treatment often necessitates a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach, involving oncologists, surgeons, radiologists, and nurses. However, disparities in healthcare facility distribution, particularly in rural regions, can impede access and impose financial and physical burdens on patients.

To address these challenges, Icon Sunsuria, a collaboration between Icon Cancer Centre and Sunsuria Healthcare, strives to provide comprehensive cancer care in Malaysia. Audrey Ooi, CEO of Sunsuria Healthcare, emphasised a patient-centric vision, emphasising partnerships among healthcare providers to create an inclusive healthcare system ensuring access to top-notch cancer care for all Malaysians.

Icon Sunsuria's recent partnership with Island Hospital is set to expand access to quality care by offering advanced treatments and holistic care from a multidisciplinary team of specialists. Ooi expressed a goal of establishing more cancer centres across Malaysia within the next five to seven years to empower more cancer patients and their families.

This initiative integrates evidence-based medical breakthroughs to introduce innovative therapeutic methods that go beyond traditional chemotherapy and radiation. These include targeted cancer therapies, pinpointing specific cancer cells with precision to disrupt their growth while preserving healthy cells. Immunotherapy, administered through injections, infusions, or direct methods, manipulates the body's immune system to strengthen it or directly target cancer cells. This diverse treatment range encompasses cancer vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, checkpoint inhibitors, and CAR T-cell therapy.

Furthermore, the centre has invested in improving chemotherapy and radiation techniques, featuring enhanced delivery methods. For instance, the HyperArc, integrated with the Varian TrueBeam linear accelerator, precisely targets multiple brain tumours, reducing radiation exposure to healthy tissue and minimising side effects associated with conventional brain radiation, like headaches and hair loss.

Finding support during cancer journey

A cancer diagnosis can significantly alter the lives of patients and their families, impacting them physically, emotionally, and financially. Consequently, having strong support networks and access to resources becomes crucial for those navigating the challenges of cancer. In Malaysia, several avenues offer assistance:

- Social Security Organisation (PERKESO): Provides financial support to cancer patients unable to work, offering relief and easing some of the financial strain associated with the illness, allowing patients to focus on their recovery.^[5]
- Malaysian Cancer Council (MAKNA): Focuses on offering financial aid, particularly targeting underprivileged patients, while also contributing to cancer awareness and research efforts.^[6]
- National Cancer Society Malaysia (NCSM): Extends psychosocial services such as counseling, nutritional guidance, and peer groups, providing crucial emotional support.^[7]

As Malaysians unite to confront the escalating burden of cancer, the primary objective remains clear: ensuring that no individual faces this battle alone. By closing knowledge gaps, advocating for early detection, and fostering a supportive and informed community, the nation can make substantial progress in combating cancer.

As Ooi aptly expresses, "Through collective efforts involving policymakers, healthcare providers, and nonprofit organizations, we can diminish the impact of cancer on individuals and offer them comfort throughout

their cancer journey. Empowering more people with knowledge, dispelling misconceptions and fears, we can profoundly influence the fight against cancer.”

References:

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