

Are we prepared to go grey?

IN Malaysia, those aged 60 years and above are deemed senior citizens, based on the definition agreed to at the World Assembly On Ageing 1982 in Vienna. As such, there are serious problems and challenges ahead because Malaysia will reach ageing nation status in 10 years when 15% of its population will be at least 60 years old. There are currently two million people aged 60 or older in the country, and this is set to increase to six million by 2040.

United Nations data show that the average person has gained an extra 30 years of life and can now expect to live to 72.6 years old. Japan, the world's third largest economy, is already experiencing population ageing. By 2030, one in every three people in that country will be 65 or older and one in five people will be 75-plus years old.

Malaysia will eventually face the same fate due to rapid greying. This greying has implications for all aspects of our society, from healthcare and financial services to city planning and social services. According to a recent *Work Of The Future* report from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States, "Demographic shifts will impose steep burdens on national budgets as the ratio of retirees to workers rises and as the growth rate of working-age taxpayers slows."

Apart from that, we have to look into loneliness and other mental health issues among the elderly when Malaysia becomes an ageing nation. We often hear stories of senior citizens being abandoned and forced to live in deplorable conditions on their own. It's very heart-breaking to read reports of elderly people who are neglected, especially those who still have living children or relatives. There are cases of parents being abandoned at hospitals, welfare homes or even bus stops by their own children or relatives. Elder abandonment affects senior citizens' emotional well-being, causing depression that can subsequently trigger senility or dementia.

The Malaysian Healthy Ageing



Photo: Filepic

Society has proposed that the government should consider having a separate ministry or division to focus on our ageing population. The society has highlighted the lack of professionals to handle senior citizens, as there are only 40 geriatricians and around 2,000 occupational therapists in Malaysia. International Medical University consultant psychiatrist Prof Dr Philip George has said mental health also plays a huge role in healthy ageing and that we are doing too little to help prevent common mental health disorders in the ageing population.

We must remember that this problem will become a huge burden on carers too, as many families find it a real challenge to look after elderly people who are mentally challenged. More awareness programmes must be initiated to educate society about the prevention of mental health problems at all levels.

Mental health problems affecting senior citizens are serious as they could lead to suicide. There is no reliable data on suicide among the elderly but throughout the world, including in Malaysia, suicide among the elderly is a huge and complex problem. This is a serious issue that needs to be addressed by not just professionals such as psychiatrists but also general health professionals. We must treat this

issue as a public health problem rather than just a specialist matter.

There is also an urgent need for the government to introduce a special Act to safeguard the well-being of elder folk being left alone at home or abandoned elsewhere. Failure to visit or give proper care to senior relatives could be considered a form of neglect and should be subjected to legal action to prevent younger people from abandoning their responsibilities to parents and other senior relatives. Although some may question the need to introduce such a law, the negative developments in recent years should justify such a drastic action to stop the problem from worsening. Also, many people think that if parents can be charged for abandoning their children, the same action should be taken against children who abandon elderly parents.

We used to pride ourselves on our Eastern culture that teaches young people to be courteous to and respectful of the elderly but such noble values are diminishing due to various reasons, including pressure from an ever increasing cost of living. Since this cost is expected to increase in years to come, it is important to provide a social safety net for senior citizens; this could include allowing them to work, as is happening in many Asian countries.

The government could emulate the approach taken by other countries that have introduced various financial incentives for employers to hire or retain older workers and subsidise job training for them. The country must also have a more comprehensive social security programme since studies show that retirement income for most older people is inadequate.

Among others, we must foster a more affordable independent care system, such as the one in Hong Kong, a country with the highest life expectancy in the world. In Hong Kong, about 40% of domestic workers are taking care of older adults, enabling them to stay in their home.

More non-governmental organisations should be set up to care for senior citizens who are neglected by their family members, especially those who are ill. We need to help the elderly to remain in the community by providing daycare centres and day hospitals, social clubs, rehabilitation, counselling and advice centres, volunteer schemes and home nursing.

The existence of "Homehelp volunteers" under the Social Welfare Department, for example, can help solve problems faced by senior citizens in their neighbourhood. Under the programme, volunteers visit each senior citizen in a designated area at least three times a month as well as monitor their health and social development. Such a support system that involves the local community will indirectly make neighbours more aware of the problems and needs of senior citizens living in the vicinity.

Our main aim in caring for the elderly is to ensure that they can have a good quality life in their twilight years. I believe that the most important thing for us to do now is to practise noble values including respecting and caring for the elderly who have sacrificed a lot to raise us up.

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