Cancer Society calls for early detection to cut ‘needless deaths’

February 4, 2019 (World Cancer Day) – With one in two patients of the most common cancers dying within five years of diagnosis, the National Cancer Society of Malaysia (NCSM) calls for action on early detection to save lives.

This World Cancer Day, NCSM joins the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) – the largest and oldest cancer organisation worldwide – in emphasising cancer detection, screening, and diagnosis worldwide.

In a new policy brief “Early detection saves lives”, the Society urges the public, healthcare providers, the Government, and policymakers to focus on the three most ‘screenable’ cancers (breast, cervical and colorectal). The policy also lists six challenges and ten recommendations to improve the rates of early detection, screening, and diagnosis in the country.

“Breast, cervical, and colorectal cancer – the most common cancers in Malaysia – can be detected using simple, cost-effective tests, and are extremely treatable when presented early,” says Dr Murallitharan M., Medical Director of NCSM.

“And yet, half of these cancers are detected late, drastically affecting the patient’s chances of survival,” says Mandy Thoo, Head of the Health Education at NCSM. “For example, 43 per cent of breast cancer cases, 40 per cent of cervical cancer cases, and 66 per cent of colorectal cancer cases are presented at late stages (III and IV).

“The 5-year survival rates of these cancers when detected at stage IV are: 23 per cent for breast, 23 per cent for cervical, and 17 per cent for colorectal, as revealed by the Malaysian Study on Cancer Survival (MySCan).”

Dr Saunthari Somasundaram, President of NCSM, explains that while treatment is important, early detection and diagnosis play a big role in surviving the disease. “Even in high income countries, the difference in survival rates is mainly linked to the patient’s condition at diagnosis, rather than disparity in treatment.
“Evidence shows that one of the most factors that determines the survival rate is the stage at diagnosis.”

In the policy brief, NCSM lists lack of resources, poor health literacy, poor uptake of screenings, limited access to screening and diagnostic programmes, and suboptimal cancer knowledge among healthcare professionals as barriers to early detection, screening and diagnosis.

Some of the recommendations developed to be implemented in Malaysia include:

- incorporating the three ‘screenable’ cancers as a part of employees' medical check-up, life insurance policies, as well as healthcare schemes for the B40 group,
- providing meal and transportation vouchers to encourage disadvantaged communities from remote areas to attend screenings,
- training primary care physicians on improving early recognition of cancer signs and symptoms, referral pathways, and good diagnostic services,
- integrating cancer education and screening components to the Government’s existing non-health programmes, and
- delivering sustainable education programmes for different levels of society that include the recognition of signs and symptoms, as well as how and when to seek help from healthcare professionals.

The policy brief is available at: bit.ly/NCSMbrief0219
About National Cancer Society of Malaysia / Persatuan Kebangsaan Kanser Malaysia (NCSM)

The National Cancer Society Malaysia (NCSM) is the first not-for-profit cancer organisation in Malaysia that provides education, care and support services for people affected by cancer. Over the last 50 years, it provides holistic cancer support to patients and caregivers. NCSM supports patients in understanding and dealing with cancer in various phases through its five cancer centres – the Cancer and Health Screening Clinic, Nuclear Medicine Centre, Resource and Wellness Centre, Quit Smoking Clinic and the Children’s Home of Hope and has branches in six states, i.e. Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Perak, Penang and Sarawak.

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