

On the track of the silent killer

A FEW weeks ago, I received an unexpected call from my sister. She said a nephew had just collapsed and died at the young age of 37. He had suffered from hypertension even though he lived an active lifestyle.

Increasingly, many Malaysians below 40 years of age are succumbing to hypertension, which is also known as the silent killer.

Is there a way to prevent this? Medical researchers have launched many investigative projects looking for answers to the problem but the results have been inconclusive and are only inferences to the cause.

A comprehensive population study is under way to get a better understanding of the root causes. The study involves a collaboration between three countries – the United Kingdom, Malaysia and the Philippines. It is expected to be carried out over a number of years during which population data on

various lifestyle parameters would be collected.

In Malaysia, the vice chancellor of UCSI University is leading the project with collaboration from UPM and UiTM. Funded by the Malaysia-UK joint research fund, named the Ungku Omar/Newton fund, the study hopes to reach more conclusive findings on how to tame hypertension, which is wreaking havoc throughout the world.

There is no doubt that the findings of the study will be beneficial. The end game is to improve our understanding of the real causes behind the rise in non-communicable diseases like hypertension.

We should give more priority to such high-impact research. I have been following the research trend in this country and noted the tendency to focus on low-impact research work. Yes, we have seen an impressive rise in the number of research publications from universities, but

the data show that most have a low citation index, which confirms their low impact. This may be due to the fact that they were driven by the obsession with ranking, which is rather unfortunate.

There is a major problem with our research planning. We do not plan for the long term. It has always been a short-term execution. At one time, there was a high-impact research programme parked at Universiti Malaya but it saw an early demise.

At one time too, we had a strong commitment to photonics research. This was when photonics companies like Huawei were not even born yet. Despite our lack of persistence, we still have diehards in photonics research like Prof Datuk Dr Harith Ahmad at UM. But as a nation, we have not been able to capitalise on the commercial potential of photonics in the way companies like Huawei have done

and are still doing. It is time we rethink our strategy on research planning in our country.

The three-country population study on hypertension, branded as RESPOND, has been running for more than a year now. I had the opportunity to join the research group in a few of their data collection activities.

In Malaysia, they picked four states for the research – Penang, Selangor, Kelantan and Johor. In each state, they interviewed two sets of the population, one each from the rural and urban areas.

Some of the initial results suggest some shocking revelations. There is evidence to show that many Malaysians either do not know they have the disease or do not give serious attention to their therapeutic prescriptions. They do not strictly follow the medication regime given by their doctors.

According to the scientists

involved in the study, they are also looking at other behavioural data to link to such practices.

Comparisons would then be made between the rural and urban data, as well as among the three participating countries.

It has become evident through past studies that clinical drug trials alone will not provide the answers to many of our medical problems. Different people respond differently to the drugs. This has been explained as the influence of each individual's genetic make-up on the efficacy of drugs.

A population study like RESPOND would provide more realistic conclusions to the remedy. Thus, the study would help us track this silent killer more effectively.

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