

Low health literacy among B40 a growing concern

THE pandemic has exposed serious flaws about health matters in the country. The fact that health literacy is low in the country is a cause for concern.

Many are still in denial about the usefulness of the vaccine in managing Covid-19 infections. This is despite all the evidence available.

Though low health literacy is not limited to any group, it is most rampant, unfortunately, among the Bottom 40 per cent (B40).

Look at the recent three-country study on hypertension among the B40 group. The study, called "Respond", is a joint effort between the United Kingdom, Malaysia and the Philippines.

In Malaysia, the project is a collaboration between a few universities, including Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti Putra Malaysia and UCSI University.

Led by the late Datuk Dr Khalid Yusof of UCSI University, the study unveiled some disconcerting facts about hypertension management among the B40 group.

* The findings provide feedback



**DATUK
DR AHMAD
IBRAHIM**

to policymakers on implementation challenges of national hypertension policies. The UK partner, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, provided useful partnership in the research.

The study's B40 participants included those in urban and rural areas. The states of Penang, Johor, Kelantan and Selangor were selected.

Questions posed covered access to information, diagnosis and treatment. The findings have been written as policy briefs for submission to health professionals and the government.

As part of efforts to share the study's findings with the public, especially the B40, a webinar was

held. An overwhelming number of about 800 participants joined.

Three key members of the study presented the findings and answered questions from the audience. Judging by the questions, many among the B40 still have a poor understanding of how to best manage hypertension.

In terms of access to information, diagnosis and treatment, the study confirmed that we in Malaysia do enjoy good health support infrastructure.

Government health clinics are easily accessible in many parts of the country, especially in West Malaysia.

The situation in East Malaysia is still dire though. Clinics provide good support in terms of information and consultation for those who require advice on hypertension.

There is, therefore, no reason for the B40 not to know what to do when dealing with hypertension.

Regular screening of hypertension is part of the prescribed management regime. The government has introduced a scheme called PeKa B40 which provides

all kinds of support, including paying for transport to health clinics for screenings.

But according to the Health Ministry, the campaign has received lukewarm response. So much so that the government is thinking of using mobile clinics.

Based on findings from the Respond study, the major challenge has to do with the need to change lifestyle. Despite being diagnosed with hypertension, many still skip taking the prescribed medicine.

Many still treat the disease as not serious. Many were surprised when told that there is no cure for hypertension. The fact that hypertension can be effectively managed through diligent medication and suitable lifestyle change is also not well understood.

Few would dispute that hypertension costs the economy significantly. It is a silent killer which has no cure. But over the years, scientists have found ways to manage the disease through medication and lifestyle change.

It is unfortunate that this mes-

sage has not reached everyone. This was revealed in the Respond study. A major suggestion of the study is for health authorities to rethink the communication strategy on hypertension to achieve a wider reach in the population.

Unfortunately, the part that is most challenging concerns the practices of the B40 themselves. This is where no kind of infrastructure can help.

It is to do with the behaviour of those with the disease. Many among the B40, as revealed during the webinar's question time, still believe hypertension is curable.

It's the same with Covid-19. Despite the fact that those vaccinated are shown to be less prone to serious infections, many still refuse to get the booster dose.

It all boils down to low appreciation for evidence-based health management in the country. Many still listen to hearsay rather than take the advice of doctors.

The writer is a professor at the Tan Sri Omar Centre for STI Policy, UCSI University