Catering to the aged

UMMC's Malaysian Elders Longitudinal Research aims to assess the needs and challenges facing our ageing population.

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Research studies are vital to recognise concerns as well as access thoughts, opinions and feelings on issues ranging from culture to politics. Besides providing new insights on various topics, research plays an important role in making decisions for better living, too.

As our country moves towards an ageing society, it is important to take the necessary steps to meet the needs of a growing elderly population. As such, Universiti Malaya's effort to conduct the Malaysian Elders Longitudinal Research (MELOR) comes at a timely juncture.

MELOR's principal investigator, Associate Professor Dr Shahbulbahy Kamaruzzaman explained that the country is facing a “silver tsunami” as Malaysia's ageing population is rapidly growing. She explained that action-orientated research is vital in facilitating our nation to prepare for the challenges facing senior citizens.

"The demographic transition from a young to older age structure has reached global proportions among the world's population. Western countries became aged when they were already developed, but Malaysia - being a developing country - has a shorter time to adjust to this rapidly ageing population. This has significant implications for the world’s population is undergoing an "ageing boom" as there is a rapid increase in the number of older people today. The Malaysian National Statistics Department Population Projection (2010-2040) states that the population aged 65 and above is estimated to increase three-fold by 2031. In 2010, there were two million people over 60 years (7%); this number will reach 3.4 million (11%) by 2020 and is expected to touch nine million (22%) by 2050. Compared to Western countries, the Malaysian elderly population is increasing even more rapidly.

MELOR aims to generate comprehensive data on the overall needs and issues faced by the older population in Malaysia. The study is unique in that the information is derived through interviews and health checks, covering all aspects of health, quality of life, housing, social needs, and economic and financial requirements.

Dr Shahbulbahy explained that the research study would provide a solid foundation for a more strategic policy-making and legislative framework for the care of the elderly.

"Some of the common issues faced by seniors include lack of access to basic transportation, lack of age-friendly infrastructure and services within their community, rising cost of living including in assisted nursing homes, and clear paths in accessing medical care and services," said Dr Shahbulbahy, who is a consultant geriatrician at University of Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) in Kuala Lumpur.

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7% elderly population out of the country's 28 million citizens. The majority of the specialists are in Kuala Lumpur (nine), Perak (three) and Johor (two), with one geriatrician each in Malacca, Penang, Selangor, Sabah and Sarawak. Presently there are only 13 medical personnel who are training to be geriatricians.

Our main aim is to assess and investigate the needs, issues and challenges of our growing older population. MELOR's vision is to ensure a better standard of living for Malaysians as they grow older," she explained.

Dr Shahbulbahy added that a lot of the information that formed the basis for MELOR came from a focus group discussion and meetings with senior citizens' organisations, residents' associations, nursing home administrators and various NGOs in Malaysia.

The research is supported by the Education Ministry with a research grant of RM4.57mil for three years.

"The research aims to review current issues and needs of the elderly, with hopes of translating that into actual policies related to health and social care, in the legal, economic, financial and education sectors," said Dr Shahbulbahy. "MELOR hopes to be a vehicle for the development of a better support system for all Malaysians."

MELOR is looking for senior citizens who would like to participate in the research project. The initial assessments will be conducted on three separate occasions. The first two visits will be home-based. The final visit will be at the study centre. Two research assistants will be assigned to the same participant throughout the study period.

Retired nurse Yoong Ee Fah, 70, applauds UMMC's efforts to conduct MELOR, as the study could create a comprehensive framework to improve policies and legislations for the elderly.

"This is the first step towards generating comprehensive data on the needs and issues faced by the elderly. The study will be useful in improving the needs of the elderly, especially in the areas of transportation, medical care and legal protection," said Yoong.

For more information, contact MELOR Room at 016-9711451 or e-mail melor.um@gmail.com.