

AKHBAR : THE SUN DAILY
MUKA SURAT : 4
RUANGAN : NATIONAL

THE SUN DAILY M/S 4 NATIONAL 17/2/25 MONDAY



Enhancing **healthcare** for children battling cancer

► New coalition aims to merge resources, raise awareness, advocate better policies and provide better support system for families, says group president

BY DEEPALAKSHMI MANICKAM
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

KUALA LUMPUR: In conjunction with International Childhood Cancer Day (ICCD 25), which fell on Saturday, seven Malaysian childhood cancer support groups launched Childhood Cancer Malaysia (CCM), a new coalition dedicated to improving care and outcomes for children battling the disease.

It comprises Childhood Cancer Support Association (Cakne), Sarawak Children's Cancer Society, Friend of Childhood Cancer Northern, Persatuan Kebajikan Pesakit Kanak-Kanak Hospital USM, Persatuan Sokongan Kanser Kanak-Kanak Terengganu, National Cancer Society Malaysia, and Childhood Cancer Association Malaysia.

CCM president Mohd Shah Awaluddin said the initiative merges resources, raises awareness, and advocates better healthcare policies for young cancer patients and survivors.

"Through CCM, we aim to bring together key players in childhood cancer care and amplify awareness, enhance resources, and improve outcomes for children battling cancer," he said, adding that it will promote awareness, advocate better healthcare policies, and enhance training for healthcare professionals and support groups.

Mohd Shah said CCM seeks to expand access to quality care nationwide and tackle the long-term challenges of childhood cancer survivors, including health, education and financial assistance.

He said childhood cancer remains a significant health concern in Malaysia, with some 1,000 new cancer-affected children diagnosed each year. Leukaemia, brain tumours and lymphoma are among the most common types affecting them.

While survival rates have improved due to advancements in treatment, Mohd Shah said there are challenges such as late diagnosis, limited access to specialised care, and financial burdens on families, with many children in rural and underserved areas facing obstacles in



Mohd Shah with Health and Environment Department director Dr Umi Ahmad (standing centre) and participants at the CCM launch at Perdana Botanical Garden yesterday. — AMIRUL SYAFIQ/THESUN

obtaining timely treatment.

Mohd Shah said through the collective effort, CCM aims to bridge gaps in treatment access, and strengthen nationwide support systems for families affected by childhood cancer.

"Our vision is to have a future where every cancer-stricken child thrives with access to quality care and support. By working collectively, we can provide a more sustainable network that ensures no child fights alone."

Mohd Shah, who is also the father of a childhood cancer survivor, emphasised the challenges faced by families during and after treatment.

"The journey doesn't end after beating cancer. There are complications, and proper treatment and medication can take up to two or three years. Family plays an important role, but some families are left without support. That's where NGOs like us step in to provide a strong support system," he said.

Childhood Cancer International (CCI) president Rodney Wong praised CCM's establishment as a crucial multi-stakeholder initiative to support the childhood cancer community.

He called for global participation in sharing impactful initiatives, celebrating successes, breaking treatment barriers and supporting

ICCD 2025.

Wong said CCI is committed to uniting healthcare professionals, caregivers, and stakeholders to advocate greater awareness, facilitate capacity development, and promote the sharing of best practices in childhood cancer care.

Alongside the coalition's launch, Cakne launched Cakne Outdoors, an initiative to promote a healthy lifestyle among childhood cancer survivors.

Mohd Shah said Cakne Outdoors is more than just an activity-based programme.

"It's about rebuilding confidence, strength, and well-being for survivors who have fought through cancer. We want to encourage them to stay active and embrace a healthier lifestyle."

The organisation runs several initiatives to support childhood cancer patients, survivors, and their families, including "Kem Gaya Hidup Sihat", a programme promoting a healthy lifestyle post-treatment.

It also organises the "Program Literasi Digital", which equips survivors with digital skills, and "Program Bantuan Ekonomi", which offers financial assistance to individuals who have become disabled due to cancer.

Cakne also manages "Sajian Harapan Cakne", a TikTok channel that shares valuable nutritional tips and recipes for cancer patients.

MUKA SURAT : 14
RUANGAN : VIEWS

THE STAR M/S 14 MONDAY 17/2/25 VIEWS

Encourage Malaysians to celebrate shared values

MALAYSIA has long been known for its amazing mix of people from different cultures, races and religions all living together peacefully. This was the vision of the country's first leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who saw the value in each group contributing to the country's identity.

My friends in the mass media in those days would regularly tell stories about how the Tunku always practised what he preached and was colour-blind in supporting and giving encouragement to all, regardless of race or creed.

But in recent years, politics has become more focused on race and religion, causing divisions and tension among different groups.

I find it encouraging that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim recently referred to Tunku Abdul Rahman, highlighting the fact that the country's first prime minister had done the right thing in promot-

ing a multiracial, multireligious and multicultural nation. It is Tunku's consistent and lasting legacy.

His policies were important, and continue to be so even today, for keeping everyone together and promoting understanding and cooperation among different groups.

The current government's commitment to inclusivity could help to stop the fragmenting of society and create a more peaceful and harmonious country. Not only is this the right thing to do, but it's also good for the economy.

By embracing the talents and ideas of all communities, Malaysia can unlock a wealth of potential and drive economic growth. Giving everyone equal opportunities encourages entrepreneurship and collaboration, which are key to making Malaysia more



Strength in unity: In the dark days when Covid-19 reigned, frontliners of all races and religions joined hands in the fight - we just need to remember that feeling today. - Filepic/The Star

competitive on the global stage.

A stable political environment is also essential for a country to progress, and multiracial policies contribute to this stability. When everyone feels heard and repre-

sented, the risk of conflict among different groups decreases.

The journey towards embracing unity in diversity is not easy, so it's important to support efforts to promote inclusivity.

This requires everyone - the government, community groups, businesses and individuals - to work together to uphold values of mutual respect, understanding and equality.

We should encourage and support grassroots initiatives that bring people from different races together and build stronger communities. Education is also crucial in shaping people's views and attitudes.

The government should lead the way in promoting national campaigns that highlight the benefits of diversity and unity. These campaigns can change the way people think about ethnicity, encouraging Malaysians to celebrate our shared values while respecting our differences.

TAN SRI LEE LAM THYE
Member, National Unity
Advisory Council

MUKA SURAT : 11
RUANGAN : NATION

THE STAR, MONDAY 17 FEBRUARY 2025

Nation 11

THE STAR MIS 11 17/2/25 MONDAY NATION

Get vaccinated, seniors urged

Those with health issues face higher risk of serious illnesses, say doctors

By MARTIN CARVALHO
mart3@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: Elderly Malaysians should not miss the opportunity to get vaccinated free against influenza starting tomorrow, say health experts.

Malaysian Medical Association president Datuk Dr Kalwinder Singh Khaira said senior citizens, who are eligible for the free vaccination, should take full advantage by registering as soon as possible for the vaccine.

"The flu vaccine is beneficial, especially for the elderly, as it is shown to be effective in protecting against complications from the flu.

"Older persons with comorbidities are at higher risk of complications, which can even lead to hospitalisation and, in some cases, death.

"Taking precautions such as getting vaccinated is strongly advised," he said when contacted yesterday.

Dr Kalwinder, however, raised concerns over the availability of the flu vaccine at private clinics and hospitals.

"Many patients are now heeding the advice of taking precautions against the flu and asking for the vaccine.

"While we fully support the government's free vaccination programme for high-risk seniors at government clinics, it is equally important to recognise the vital role general practitioners play in community vaccination efforts."

He also urged the Health Ministry and vaccine suppliers to ensure adequate distribution of vaccines to private clinics and hospitals to prevent gaps in

immunisation coverage.

On Feb 10, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad announced the expansion of the Influenza Immunisation Programme, which was launched in 2006, to cover not only front-line healthcare workers but also senior citizens aged 60 and above with at least one chronic illness.

The rollout of the voluntary vaccination exercise will begin on Feb 18 and is expected to benefit over 170,000 high-risk senior citizens via appointments made via the MySejahtera app.

Public health expert Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia said it is commendable that the government is expanding its immunisation programme by providing free influenza vaccinations for those above 60, particularly those

with existing comorbidities.

"The risk of developing severe complications from the flu is significantly higher for elderly individuals, particularly those aged 65 and older.

"This is because they are at a much higher risk compared to younger adults due to their weakened immune system," she said.

Although she did not provide the exact numbers, Dr Sharifa said flu-related deaths are the highest among the elderly.

"Influenza can result in a host of complications, such as pneumonia, including sepsis.

"Getting vaccinated offers protection to the elderly against developing such complications, which could prove fatal," she added.

She advised senior folk who are eligible to make the effort to get vaccinated.

"Those operating homes or cen-

tres for the care of the elderly must make it a priority for seniors under their care to be vaccinated under the programme."

In 2023, pneumonia surpassed heart-related disease as the leading cause of death in the country, which accounted for 8,181 deaths, or 15.2% of 119,952 medically certified deaths for that year.

Association of Private Hospitals Malaysia president Datuk Dr Kuljit Singh said the elderly should not take influenza lightly but seize the chance to get vaccinated for free.

"Clinically speaking, there have been cases that have gone badly for those in this group."

He added that it becomes challenging for doctors treating elderly patients towards recovery due to complications linked to influenza.

MUKA SURAT : 6
RUANGAN : NATION

THE STAR M/S 6 MONDAY 17/2/25 NATION

Silent tears and cries for help

More teens struggling with mental health issues

By YUEN MEIKENG
and FARIK ZOLKEPLI
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: Childhood should be filled with laughter, but there is a growing silence among kids struggling with their mental health that we shouldn't ignore.

This is especially true with the rising number of people taking their own lives, especially those aged 18 and below.

After finding out she was born from an unplanned pregnancy, Emily (not her real name), then 15, thought of ending her life.

"My parents got married because of me, but divorced a few years later," said the teacher, now 34, in an interview.

She felt it was her fault that her mother had to struggle as a single mother.

"Knowing I was not a 'wanted' child also made me question the meaning of my life," said Emily.

But she took a brave step forward and sought help from a counsellor, which helped break the dark grip on her emotions.

She urged others to also seek help if they are struggling.

In another case, Sky (not her real name) was 14 when her parents divorced, causing her to cope by harming herself.

"I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (a mental illness that affects a person's ability to regulate emotions).

"Knowing my condition helped me to recognise my own destructive behaviours so I could stop them," said the now 26-year-old.

While the healing process has its ups and downs, Sky said the negative thoughts don't disappear altogether; instead, one gets stronger and better at dealing with them.

"You must do the most work to



help yourself if you want to get better," she said.

But more needs to be done to help others out there, with suicide cases among those aged 18 and below spiking after the pandemic.

The numbers jumped from 23 deaths in 2016 to 40 as of October last year, based on data from the police made available to *The Star*.

When contacted, the Health Ministry said the Covid-19 pandemic significantly contributed to the rise in mental health issues among youths.

Factors affecting this age group included social isolation, disruption to schooling and strained family dynamics – all of which heightened emotional distress.

"Additionally, increased exposure to online bullying and academic pressures to succeed during remote learning has worsened symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety," it said.

A study by the Institute for Health and Behavioural Research reported that adolescents may also experience neglect or insufficient emotional support from relatives while struggling with challenges during and after the pandemic.

Befrienders Kuala Lumpur publicity director Joan Chen Yen Fong said another possible reason is the growing influence of social media, which could worsen feelings of inadequacy and isolation among children and teens.

At the same time, she said such youths are not equipped with skills to manage stress, recognise their emotions, communicate

effectively or build their confidence and self-esteem.

Across age groups, Bukit Aman Criminal Investigation Department director Comm Datuk Seri Mohd Shuhaily Mohd Zain said 7,116 individuals took their own lives from 2016 to October 2024.

"The majority of those who committed suicide were men, with 5,847 (82%) of them doing so.

"Individuals who committed suicide were mostly those aged between 19 and 40," he said in an interview recently.

On why men and those aged 19 and 40 made up the biggest group, the Health Ministry said possible causes could be financial difficulties, societal expectations and pressures related to career, relationships and marital conflict.

"For men, it is also contributed by the tendency to refuse to reach out for help due to stigma and the belief that they may be labelled weak if they do so," it said.

Meanwhile, the number of people reaching out to Befrienders Kuala Lumpur has decreased.

In 2023, a total of 18,791 people contacted the helpline – a 24.2% drop from the 24,794 in 2019.

Most of those who contacted Befrienders were women, while many had professional jobs.

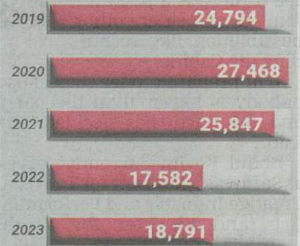
One possible reason for the decrease was the emergence of more emotional support hotlines, according to the organisation's annual report.

This includes the Health Ministry's mental health crisis helpline or Talian HEAL 15555, the Lifeline Association of Malaysia, Buddy Bear and many others.

"Such options have been available since 2020, and there's an increased awareness of such alternative helplines that can be accessed," it said.

Lending a kind ear

This shows the number of people who reached out to Befrienders Kuala Lumpur over the years.
(Year/ No. of people)



Top types of issues

This shows the top five types of problems faced by those who contacted Befrienders KL in 2023
(Type of problem /No. of people)



Those in need of emotional support can contact:

The Health Ministry's National Mental Health Crisis Line or HEAL Line:
Call 15555

Befrienders Kuala Lumpur
Call their 24-hour helpline at:
+603-7627 2929

Email sam@befrienders.org.my

Visit:
<https://www.befrienders.org.my/>
for more information.

Source: Befrienders Kuala Lumpur *The Star* graphics