

The Diabetes Pandemic

by Dennis Oh

Without urgent action, the World Health Organization has warned that the **death toll will increase by 17% over the next 10 years ... across the world diabetes now kills 4.6 million people annually**, higher than the combined death toll from HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, the three most deadly infectious diseases.

Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General, United Nations, at the European Diabetes Leadership Forum 2012

Dire warnings for a dire global situation. The world's population has surpassed seven billion, and people are moving from rural settings into cities around the globe at a speed that is creating alarming challenges for diabetes and diabetic care.

with this chronic illness, diabetes tops the World Health Organization's priority list for the prevention and care of non-communicable chronic diseases (NCDs). In other words, controlling diabetes minimises the risk and complications of other long-term illnesses.

THE NUMBERS DON'T LIE

Current statistics from the World Diabetes Foundation (WDF) reveal that in 2011, China and India led the pack in diabetes – a staggering 90 million and 61.3 million diabetic patients respectively; and numbers are rising. The next largest nation, the United States, stands at 23.7 million.

Leaders in health care have no qualms calling this trend a diabetes pandemic. Look at the statistics and you will understand why. Estimates show that 366 million people currently live with diabetes and additionally 280 million are at identifiably high risk of developing diabetes. During 2011, diabetes killed more than 12,600 people a day. Of these deaths, nearly half (48%) occurred in people under the age of 60.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

The WDF projects that 9.9% of the world's population will have diabetes by 2030. Statistics from the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) reveal that 552 million people are expected to live with the disease and 398 million are at high risk of developing diabetes.

Perhaps one of the scariest things about diabetes is that more than 50% of people with diabetes are unaware of their condition, which is costing society millions of dollars in treating the many serious complications that arise from undiagnosed or poorly treated diabetes (blindness, kidney failure, nerve diseases, limb amputations and cardiovascular diseases). In some countries, this figure may reach 80%.

Because of its nature and the multiple risk factors and co-morbid conditions connected

A SEA OF URBAN WOES

According to Jesper Høiland, Senior Vice President of Novo Nordisk and head of international relations, "another place where diabetes is exploding is Southeast Asia." IDF predicts that the number of people with diabetes in the region will increase to 120.9 million by 2030; that is 10.2% of the adult population. A further 23.8 million people have impaired glucose tolerance (IGT) in 2011, and this will increase to 38.6 million by 2030.

Approximately 95% of people with diabetes struggle with obesity, and as waves of people in Southeast Asia flow into cities and enjoy the finer things in life with less physical effort, blood sugar levels go up and so does the average weight. This spells nothing but trouble for Asians who, because of their generally weaker pancreatic beta cells, already have a higher prevalence of insulin resistance than Caucasians.

WEIGHT ON SINGAPORE'S SHOULDERS

Singapore functions as a major rallying point for many nations of various socio-economic levels and serves as a prime example of urbanisation that has led to an improved quality of life. Recent national health survey results done in 2010 reveal that the rate of diabetes in Singapore has risen to a 12-year high. 11.3% of adults aged between 18 and 69 years are diabetic, compared to 8.2% in 2004 and 9% in 1998. The obesity rate has ballooned to 11%, up from 6.9% in 2004.

With those figures growing on our own shores, we cannot ignore the fact that the world diabetes burden is Singapore's burden as well. We are in this fight together with the rest of the world.

