

HEALTH

For the future of healthcare, focus on prevention rather than cure: Panel

People are living longer and are more susceptible to chronic diseases. Industry experts call for healthcare professionals to focus on preventative treatments.

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PHOTOS



(From left) Dr Benjamin Seet, Mr Fernando Erazo, Dr Chong Yoke Sin and Professor John Wong with Perspectives moderator and host, Teymoor Nabili.

CAPTION



SINGAPORE: The challenges of chronic non-communicable diseases, healthcare affordability, ageing and infectious diseases are plaguing the future of healthcare in the globalised world.

But, instead of pouring resources into improving the quality of healthcare, investment must be made to encourage preventative measures that will likely solve more healthcare problems, said a panel of industry experts on Channel NewsAsia's Perspectives, which aired on 9 September, 2015.

This requires a shift in mindset, with a focus on living healthier lifestyles to prevent health problems.

This, said the panel, is easier said than done.

“How do we address issues of behaviour and how do we get people to invest as much into prevention to stop something from happening until something actually happens?” said Professor John Wong, Senior Vice President of Health Affairs at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Chief Executive of the National University Health System (NUHS).

“There’s a feeling that, yes, we’re all aware of cancer, heart attacks, strokes, but we somehow don’t think it’s going to happen to ourselves.

We think it will happen to everyone else, except ourselves,” said Prof Wong.

It’s clear that people are inevitably all going to die, but the problem, according to Prof Wong, is convincing people that they will.

“How do you convince people that we’re all mortal?” he asked.

The panel show, titled “The Future of Healthcare”, held at University Hall at the National University of Singapore (NUS) on August 3, invited Dr Chong Yoke Sin, CEO of Integrated Health Information Systems; Mr Fernando Erazo, head of Philips Hospital to Home business for Asia Pacific; and Dr Benjamin Seet, Executive Director of the Biomedical Research Council, Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR).

GETTING PERSONAL FOR PREVENTION



(From left) Mr Fernando Erazo, Professor John Wong and Dr Chong Yoke Sin discussing the future of healthcare on Channel NewsAsia's Perspectives panel show.

The discussion touched on providing personalised healthcare to suit the individual rather than feeding them with generic population information.

This, believes Dr Seet, will add predictability to the individual health risks faced by people.

“Many of us know what not to eat, and that smoking is bad for the health, but then again these are very generic information and not personalised to the individual. As a result, it is very hard for a typical person to sometimes associate with many of the good health practises,” said Dr Seet.

“This is where the technologies that are available today are starting to make a difference. That we are able to predict the risk of a specific individual, to a specific medical condition and to be able to do something very targeted about it,” he said.

While healthcare has become highly efficient in some specialities, Mr Erazo mentioned that chronic care is a team sport and in order to manage the disease a personalised “care team” needs to be engaged.

“The patient himself or herself is a key part of that care team,” said Mr Erazo, who says technology can be used to determine a more personalised approach to the patient, and to understand the “behavioural habits that can support the patient with being in control of the condition”.

INJECTING THE TECH IN HEALTH

Dr Chong, who works on managing IT systems in Singapore’s public health sector, talked about how to monitor individuals by having multiple devices at home for alerts to be known.

These devices will pick up information about the individual which can help play a big part in chronic disease management.

“I think people will get used to the fact that their own information will be tied in with the medical records eventually for better care,” Dr Chong said.

“(But) the technology is only as good as the doctor who puts in the information - technology can make the information more discoverable, and faster,” she said.

‘SCIENCE AND COMPLIANCE’

Prof Wong also said the healthcare industry needs to realise that it “knows very little about how individuals make decisions.”

Prescribing medication is one thing, but ensuring patients take the full course of a treatment is another.

“Drugs might be efficacious and really do their job that they’re intended to, only if patients end up taking them as per prescription and most people don’t refill their prescription. So science and compliance, or behavioural science, will help people make the right decisions at the right time,” said Mr Erazo.

“It goes beyond just information but it needs to relate to education and activation. We believe that informed patients are empowered patients,” Mr Erazo added.

Drawing on an analogy, Prof Wong reiterated that empowering individuals is a big part of the preventive approach to healthcare.

“It’s much better to build a fence to prevent people from falling into the river, rather than fishing everyone out to do CPR,” said Prof Wong

Watch the full [online episode of “The Future of Healthcare”](#), and catch up on past Perspectives episodes.