

# Obesity is preventable

By Dr TEE E SIONG

**T**HE World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted that obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally, with at least 2.6 million people dying each year as a result of being overweight or obese.

Once considered a problem only in high-income countries, the incidence of overweight and obesity are now dramatically on the rise in low- and middle-income countries. It is an ever increasing problem, and worldwide, obesity has more than doubled since 1980.

In 2008, it was estimated that 1.5 billion adults were overweight. Of these, over 200 million men and nearly 300 million women were obese.

Overweight and obesity are major risk factors for a number of chronic diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer. All efforts must therefore be made to reduce the extent of the problem and prevent the disease.

The WHO has emphasised that governments, international partners, civil society, non-governmental organisations and the private sector all have vital roles to play in contributing to obesity prevention.

In Malaysia, available data have clearly indicated that the obesity problem has reached alarming proportions. Almost half of all adult Malaysians are overweight or obese; almost a third of primary schoolchildren are overweight or obese; and almost 15% of preschool children are overweight. We do not have an option; we must urgently implement measures to control and arrest the increase in obesity in the country. All stakeholders must make greater efforts to collaborate in these intervention measures.

I would like to share with readers two recent activities related to the problem of obesity that I participated in. Both events highlighted the importance, and urgency, of the prevention of obesity.

## Obesity forum to raise awareness

In early November, Nestle Malaysia organised a forum to raise awareness on the increase in prevalence of obesity, as well as to discuss ways to tackle the issue. It was an effort to improve public knowledge about nutrition and to promote wellness among Malaysians.

Several key stakeholders participated in the forum, including representatives from the Health Ministry, the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO), the Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA), and the media.

Two presentations were made in the forum, followed by a panel discussion on topics related to the tackling of obesity in the country.

The first presentation summarised findings of a study of the nutritional status and dietary habits of primary schoolchildren. It was a large study, carried out by

## All stakeholders must collaborate in the prevention of obesity.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2007/2008, involving more than 11,000 children. The prevalence of overweight and obesity was found to be 26%. There was also a significant increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity compared to a similar survey in conducted in 2001/2002.

The second presentation summarised findings from a study by the Universiti Pertanian Malaysia of the risk of obesity and eating disorders among Malaysian adolescents. It was a much smaller study, and it revealed that the prevalence of overweight and obesity was also found to be close to 26%.

The panel discussion touched on a number of topics related to obesity reduction. These included discussions on the need to further empower people on knowledge about healthy eating and active living; obstacles to achieving a healthier diet and ways to overcome the challenges; making healthier options of foods and meals available, including foods sold in school canteens; and the role of the private sector, non-governmental organisations and professional bodies.

There were some discussions on the current intervention efforts of various stakeholders.

NSM, in collaboration with Nestle, has initiated a dedicated programme targeted towards primary schoolchildren, named its Healthy Kids Programme ([www.healthykids.org.my](http://www.healthykids.org.my)). At the conclusion of the three-year programme, it is envisaged that an educational module to impart simple and practical nutrition messages can be made available to the Education Ministry for implementation to all primary schools.

The Nutrition Month Malaysia initiatives, which commenced in 2002, will again be launched in April 2012 to bring about greater awareness of healthy eating and active living to combat non-communicable diseases, including obesity ([www.nutriweb.org.my](http://www.nutriweb.org.my)). It is hoped that all stakeholders will lend support for this nationwide effort.

There are available strategies and action plans such as those outlined in the National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN). Activities specifically directed towards tackling overweight and obesity include the need to increase awareness on obesity among all sectors of the community. The need to establish a childhood obesity prevention programme has also been identified in the NPAN.

A significant recent development is the organisation of a workshop for the prevention of overweight and obesity in Sarawak (November 14-16). It was organised by the Sarawak Health Foundation, with the technical assistance of NSM and MASO.



In Malaysia, almost half of all adults are overweight or obese; almost a third of primary schoolchildren are overweight or obese; and almost 15% of preschool children are overweight.

The expected output from the workshop was a set of programmes and activities that are practical and can be implemented in Sarawak for the prevention of overweight and obesity. It is envisaged that the action plans will be implemented, first on a pilot scale in selected sites, and then refined for implementation in other regions of the state.

The participants of the workshop were from organisations and individuals who are anticipated to participate in implementing the identified intervention programmes and activities.

These included principals and senior teachers from various kindergartens and schools in Kuching; nutritionists, dietitians, health education officers, doctors, nurses, non-governmental organisations, and other relevant stakeholders that are involved in promoting healthy eating and active living.

Workshop participants were divided into four groups according to different settings: kindergartens and primary schools; secondary schools; community; and workplace (government and private sector).

Each group was given the task to brainstorm and recommend appropriate action plans for the prevention of obesity in Sarawak. Programmes and activities that are appropriate for the identified settings, ie school, workplace, and community settings were recommended.

It was emphasised to the participants that the key factors to obesity are eating habits and sedentary lifestyle. The proposed activities should be addressing how to increase awareness on these key factors, and to take this knowledge a step further to making behaviour changes so that the public actually practises healthy eating and active living.

Recognising that behaviour changes are difficult, approaches to promotion strategies must be innovative so as to motivate the public to make the required changes. Participants were also reminded to bear in mind that changes must be sustainable. Participants must recognise what the challenges or obstacles are to making these changes, and how to overcome such obstacles.

## Workshop recommendations

It was heartening to note that there were active discussions in all

the four groups. Numerous recommendations were put forth. It was unanimously agreed that priority should be given towards recommendations targeted at children.

The following paragraphs highlight some of the main recommendations made at the workshop.

There was a clear call by workshop participants to assign nutritionists to preschools and schools. Participants were informed that there are currently 18 nutritionists in Sarawak. This was felt to be grossly inadequate. One nutritionist could be assigned to be in charge of a few schools.

I fully support this recommendation. It is timely that appropriately qualified professionals, i.e. nutritionists, should be assigned to handle all the recommended food and nutrition-related activities in preschools and schools as outlined below.

Workshop participants recommended the immediate implementation of growth monitoring of children in all schools. Standardised weighing scales should be provided to all preschools and schools and teachers trained in the measurement and recording of body-mass index. Nutritionists are expected to work discreetly with parents in arranging for counselling sessions for overweight and obese children.

In the third recommendation, participants recommended the intensification of nutrition education activities in all preschools and schools.

Age-appropriate modules on healthy eating are recommended to be developed for use in schools. Regular awareness sessions aimed at parents and teachers on healthy eating and active living should also be carried out.

The nutritionist assigned to the schools should also provide appropriate guidance and periodic review of foods sold in school canteens.

In parallel with nutrition promotion, participants also called for the intensification of physical activity in all schools. It was recommended that physical education teachers should be assigned to every school, to organise activities related to physical activities, e.g. fitness activities, and sports and games. He is expected to collaborate with nutritionists to conduct active lifestyle activities in the school, and together ensure that the effective conduct of Pendidikan Jasmani dan Kesihatan (PJJK) classes.

An interesting, and I thought

rather apt recommendation, was the call for the implementation of a 1 Sarawak Breakfast Club. In this proposal, preschools are to be provided nutritious breakfast to children. In conjunction with this, brief nutrition promotion activities as well as physical activity sessions could be carried out.

Aside from schools, workshop participants also made recommendations appropriate for the community as a whole. Recommendations were made to conduct regular healthy lifestyle sessions in the community, especially for mothers-and fathers-to-be so that healthy eating can commence in a newly formed family.

Activities were also identified to promote increased awareness of healthy eating when eating out. A systematic set of recommendations was also made to promote healthy eating and active living in the work place.

I certainly hope that Sarawak will be able to implement some of these recommendations soon.

## An urgent call for action

Overweight and obesity are likely to become even greater problems in the country. There is an urgent need to take immediate action to tackle the problem.

We need comprehensive obesity prevention programmes, not piecemeal activities. We need to elaborate on the programmes identified in the NPAN; there must be serious efforts to implement these identified activities.

We need to start young, work with kindergartens, reaching out to the kindy operators, teachers, and children. We also need to work on primary schoolchildren, their parents, and the teachers, another "captured" population that is amenable to interventions.

The National Strategic Plan for non-communicable diseases has emphasised promoting partnerships with NGOs, professional bodies, food industry, and all stakeholders to realise the objectives.

The food industry too has a role to play and can make their contributions. We need to have trust so that all stakeholders can work together in these efforts.

We need to act now.

■ Dr Tee E Siong pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail [starhealth@thestar.com.my](mailto:starhealth@thestar.com.my).