



More younger men are getting heart attacks : NUH docs

By Salma Khalik - Feb 4, 2006

MORE men are getting their first heart attack before age 45 because they and their doctors did not detect and treat the warning signs early enough, according to a team of National University Hospital (NUH) doctors.

A study they did showed that almost all the young heart attack patients had at least one warning sign that put their heart at risk.

About 60 per cent of the younger patients were smokers, 86 per cent had high cholesterol levels and 40 per cent had high blood pressure.

Early treatment would have delayed or prevented a heart attack, the doctors said.

The 61 younger patients made up 11 per cent of first heart attack patients at NUH in 2000. This went up to 76 by 2002. Preliminary figures show a big jump in 2003, with young patients accounting for 16 per cent in the first nine months.

The hospital does not have figures for 2004 or last year.

Dr Tan Huay Cheem, NUH senior consultant and chief of cardiology, told The Straits Times he has seen an upward trend over the past few years.

In a paper published in the Singapore Medical Journal last month, Dr Tan and his colleagues contend that doctors and their younger patients may be blase about treating risky conditions early.

They said there was 'a significant undertreatment' of high cholesterol and blood pressure levels among younger patients.

What disturbed them most: the 'large proportion' of patients who had not been treated for high cholesterol levels.

They wrote: 'Presumably, preventive measures tend to be focused on the older population who are traditionally viewed as a higher-risk cohort.'

They also found a disproportionately high rate among Indian and Malay men.

Fewer than half of those suffering from early heart attacks were Chinese.

Dr Tan said younger men usually recover faster from an attack, but about 30 per cent are likely to die within 15 years.

'Given their poor outcomes following an attack, physicians should be motivated enough and have a particular sense of urgency in helping them control these risk factors,' he said.

Dr Terrance Chua, head of cardiology at the National Heart Centre, thought the NUH doctors were stating the obvious.

'Heart attack patients would be expected to have more risk factors and poorer control of these risk factors than the general population, which is why they had their heart attack to begin with,' he said.

Rather than look at those who have had an attack, a better way to determine if younger people are undertreated is to see how they fare among the general population.

General practitioner Lee Kheng Hock offered many reasons for the poor control of risks among these younger people, which the study was not able to ascertain.

He said: 'Maybe the young are complacent. Maybe doctors are too focused on the elderly because they are taught to do so. Maybe health promotion is deficient. Maybe the health care system is not focused enough on prevention. Maybe tobacco companies are too effective at selling cigarettes.'

'There are so many maybes.'

Associate Professor Goh Lee Gan, vice-president of the College of Family Physicians, urged a positive reaction to the findings: 'Young people with risk factors end up with heart attacks. So let us do something to reduce that if we can.'

He said people who are overweight or have a family history of heart attacks should check their risk profile. Both they and their doctors must realise the need to control these risks.

Multi-level marketer Leslie Williams, 44, who died of a sudden heart attack in October last year, did not know he was at risk as he had not gone for regular check-ups.

Following his death, his sister Ruby, 46, went for a check-up and found she had very high levels of cholesterol and two blocked arteries.

She had four stents inserted to widen the blood vessels.

HEARTS AT RISK

Percentage of young heart attack patients with these risk factors:

- High cholesterol levels 86%
- Smoking 61%
- High blood pressure 40%
- Diabetes 22%
- Family history 20%

By ethnic group

- Chinese 46%
- Indian 26%
- Malay 22%
- Others 7%