

Is there more to sudden deaths than we know?

By Eng Chee Koon - Nov 25, 2006
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Five inexplicable deaths in three weeks. And the victims were all young men in the prime of their lives.

While questions are being asked on what could have triggered these deaths, the victims' loved ones mourn and try to cope with the loss.

In Singapore, sudden deaths are not new. This phenomenon first hit the headlines during the 1980s when a number of Thai migrant workers mysteriously died in their sleep.

According to findings published in the International Journal of Epidemiology in 1992, there were 235 cases of sudden unexpected death syndrome (SUDS) among apparently healthy Thai male migrant workers between 1982 and 1990.

Then, as now, medical experts were stumped as post-mortem studies yielded inconclusive results on the root cause of SUDS. However, the 1992 study noted that the victims had "anomalies in the cardiac conduction system."

Nonetheless, the recent deaths - the latest case being that of a 35-year-old Singaporean businessman working in Xiamen, China - have raised concerns that more in-depth studies should be carried out to investigate if there is an underlying trend emerging.

A concerned reader, Mr Kris Kong, 50, asked in an email to AsiaOne: "I am wondering how come no in-depth investigations are carried out."

When contacted, he said it was disturbing to him that young men who are otherwise fit and healthy can drop dead so suddenly. He added that this should be reason enough for the health authorities to carry out research into the matter.

Indeed, the recent spate of cases is alarming, and all the more so when they occur within such a short span of time. But doctors are saying there is no cause for panic. Available statistics show that the general trend has remained the same.

A study by the National Heart Centre showed that the number of people in the 18 to 60 age group who died suddenly each year totalled about 300. In the study, a cardiovascular condition was the factor for most recorded deaths, while 3 per cent of cases had no known cause.

Given that, the challenge for doctors is how to prevent sudden deaths, if it is even preventable in the first place. To this end, it would be useful to identify high risk groups and then put in place measures to educate them on the possible dangers.

In this respect, a pertinent and obvious area to explore is the lifestyle of the victims. According to Dr Low Lip Ping, chairman of the Singapore Heart Foundation, victims often had congenital or underlying heart conditions that they were not aware of.

Over in the United States, The American Heart Association has found that when sudden deaths occur in young adults, especially those who are active, the adrenaline released during intense physical activity often acts as a trigger when these abnormalities are present.

However, this is not to say athletic activity is a no-go. If anything, maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important.

While being careful not to overplay the impact of stress as a trigger to sudden cardiac death, a common factor among some of the recent victims was that they were leading busy, stressful lives, juggling family and career. The fourth victim - 32-year-old Dr Toh Wei Keong, who died on Nov 17,

Five deaths, but no answers



Danil Shagimardanov, 16
Student
Died on Oct 24



Soh Chee Yong, 25
Store Manager
Died on Nov 12



Toh Wei Keong, 32
Doctor
Died on Nov 17

Others:

-Christopher Lim, 35
Doctor
Died on Oct 27

-**Latest** : A S'porean business director, 35, who died in Xiamen on Nov 18

was known to have clocked 15-hour days in his clinic.

The 1992 study in the International Journal of Epidemiology made a similar deduction. It said one of the precipitating factors for sudden deaths among the Thai migrant workers could have been stress from long hours of work.

Perhaps then, the case should be made for the cultivation of better lifestyle habits. The Health Promotion Board (HPB) advocates having a balanced diet, exercise, proper stress management, and keeping a close eye on blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol if they are existing conditions.

Regardless, the fact remains that five young men were robbed of their potential unexpectedly and that, in itself, is the greatest loss to bear for their family and friends

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