

'Low screening uptake hinder colorectal cancer awareness'

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KOTA KINABALU: Colorectal cancer awareness campaigns have gained traction nationwide, but low screening uptake continues to hinder early detection efforts, healthcare experts say.

Speaking in conjunction with Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month in March, the experts highlighted a persistent gap between awareness and action, despite the disease remaining a major public health concern in Malaysia.

Colorectal cancer is the second most common cancer in the country and the leading cancer among men.

Lifetime risk stands at one in 10 for men and one in nine for women, with the disease affecting all communities, with higher incidence among the Chinese population, followed by Malays and Indians.

"Colorectal cancer is one of the few cancers that can be prevented and effectively treated if detected early," said General Surgeon and Colorectal Surgery Fellow at Hospital Universiti Malaysia Sabah (HUMS), Dr Mohd Firdaus Mohd Hayati.

He noted that a nationwide screening programme introduced in 2014 offers the immunochemical faecal occult blood test (iFOBT) to asymptomatic individuals aged between 50 and 75.

The non-invasive test detects, available at government clinics, detects hidden blood in stool – an early indicator of colorectal cancer.

However, uptake remains critically low.

Data from the National Strategic Plan for Colorectal Cancer 2021–2025 shows that fewer than one per cent of eligible individuals undergo screening annually at public

healthcare facilities.

A separate study in Peninsular Malaysia, published in the Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention, found only 0.7 per cent of respondents had undergone screening within five years.

Experts said the challenge extends beyond initial screening.

Patients who test positive through iFOBT are required to undergo colonoscopy for confirmation, but compliance remains inconsistent, with only 52 to 67 per cent proceeding with the procedure between 2014 and 2018.

Barriers include psychological discomfort, stigma, misconceptions about colonoscopy being painful and fear of diagnosis.

Practical issues such as long waiting times, transportation difficulties – particularly among the elderly – and financial constraints further discourage participation.

General Surgeon and Colorectal Surgery Fellow at Hospital Shah Alam, Dr Devanraj Selvam, said more than 70 per cent of colorectal cancer cases in Malaysia are diagnosed at late stages.

"Late-stage diagnosis leads to more complex and costly treatment, with significantly lower survival rates," he said, noting that five-year survival is about 75 per cent for stage one but drops to 17 per cent for stage four cases.

Healthcare experts stressed that addressing the issue requires more than awareness campaigns alone, calling for structural improvements and behavioural changes to boost screening and follow-up rates.

Among proposed measures is the implementation of Patient

Navigation Programmes to guide patients through screening and treatment, ensuring better compliance while providing emotional and logistical support.

Doctors are also urged to take a more proactive role in recommending screening to eligible patients.

"As the nation observes Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, bridging the gap between awareness and action is critical.

"Without stronger participation in screening and follow-up, opportunities for early detection and potentially life-saving treatment will continue to be missed," the health experts said.



Dr Mohd Firdaus Mohd Hayati



Dr Devanraj Selvam



iFOBT screening kit.



Colonoscopy screening examination.