

From 2006 to 2008, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) has been constantly ranked as the sixth leading cause of hospitalisation. With the increasingly younger population of smokers in the country, COPD may move up the ranking if steps are not taken to curb this deadly disease.

COPD has taken a backseat over the previous years and measures to curtail the number of people who are at risk of developing the disease were not given much consideration. Thankfully, the situation is now changing, largely due to the increasing awareness on COPD prevention and management.

We caught up with Dr Ong Kian Chung, a Respiratory Physician at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, the President of the Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) Association (Singapore) and the National Leader of the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (GOLD) who share his thoughts on the recent updates concerning COPD and how the COPD Association (Singapore) has contributed to improve the awareness of the COPD situation in the country.

### On COPD Association (Singapore)

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* How did the COPD Association (Singapore) begin? What is the role of this to the public?

*Dr Ong:* The COPD Association (Singapore) was started in 2004. At that time we knew that COPD was under diagnosed or diagnosed late and there were lots of negativity about COPD among patients, relatives as well as among the medical community.

This negativity is because many see COPD as a self-inflicted illness, so there was less sympathy for those people who were suffering from COPD. Treatment options were also limited in the late stages so doctors can give medicines but the patient will still come back to us not feeling better.

My colleagues and I thought that it was time to have an association that will promote wellness so that awareness would help early diagnosis. The members of the COPD Association (Singapore) at that time came from different walks of life. The core people who were running the association consisted of people with medical background such as doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, respiratory therapists and equipment vendors.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* Tell us more about “Love Our Lungs,” a public forum on 21<sup>st</sup> November.

*Dr Ong:* The COPD Association (Singapore) would like to reach out to both the medical community as well as the public in this forum. This is the first time that the association is doing a public forum together with Singapore Cancer Society and the Health Promotion Board, and it is co-sponsored by Boehringer Ingelheim and Pfizer. It might be the first of a series of annual events.

“Love Our Lungs” is held in commemoration with the World COPD Day 2009. This day is a worldwide programme, which was started by GOLD. On this day, all the countries will have an event in conjunction with the World COPD Day.

### COPD in Singapore

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* How prevalent is COPD in Singapore?

*Dr Ong:* The estimated number of COPD sufferers in Singapore is 64000, which means that 3.5 per cent of those above 30 years old have COPD. COPD is consistently within the top 10 killer diseases in Singapore.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* In Singapore, what is the percentage of COPD patients who are smoking or who used to smoke?

*Dr Ong:* Based on what I have observed, about more than 90 per cent of COPD patients are smokers (current smokers or ex-smokers). Smoking is a major risk factor for having COPD, the biggest one by far. Other causes would be passive smoking, pollution, rare genetic causes, industrial smoke and fumes as well as infection. However, these are all very uncommon factors.

# Championing COPD

Dr Ong Kian Chung is hopeful that with increased awareness on COPD, conquering it will be a possibility

By Dr Shyneth Galapia

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* Is COPD being adequately treated in Singapore? Why is this so?

*Dr Ong:* No. Currently, there are a lot of cases that are diagnosed late. The first time that people find out that they have COPD is when they come to the hospital due to shortness of breath.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* What is the cost of not treating COPD for the patients and their families?

*Dr Ong:* There will be higher medical costs. As the disease progresses, later on in life, the person is likely to need more medical attention and incur higher health costs. Most of the cost of treating COPD comes from hospitalisation, which is very expensive.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* As the COPD progresses, how does it affect a patient's life and their family?

*Dr Ong:* In the early stages, the person can be quite normal. They may complain of persistent or frequent coughing with phlegm. As COPD progresses, the person may realise that he/she easily feels short of breath, especially with exertion. This is what usually brings the person to seek medical attention. Before that, they may think that the cough and phlegm is just a smoker's cough.

Unfortunately, by the time they have shortness of breath upon exertion, the lung function has already declined. Some people, as a result of the shortness of breath, give up the activities that cause them to experience shortness of breath. For example, if they usually walk two kilometers daily, they may take the bus instead.

What they don't realise is that they may be less breathless, but they also give up the things that they like to do. Because COPD is a gradual process, they may think that they are still okay and the breathlessness is just a part of the ageing process. Then one day, they get a bout of infection (severe flu or pneumonia). This is when they really get short of breath and they end up in the hospital emergency room gasping for air. That's how a lot of cases present because they are not diagnosed till at a late stage. This is a chronic disease that is gradual in progression and can be missed until the late stage.

### Act early for COPD

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* How important is earlier diagnosis and treatment for COPD?

*Dr Ong:* Early diagnosis is very important

because COPD is an irreversible condition. Whatever lung function is lost cannot be regained. The earlier they are diagnosed and treated, the better we preserve the lung function and the person's functional status.

Worldwide, the recommendation for early diagnosis is to encourage people who are smokers or ex-smokers with symptoms such as chronic cough, sputum production and shortness of breath to seek medical attention early. Then amongst the medical community the best is to perform a simple test, called spirometry, to confirm COPD. I encourage people, especially those at risk and with symptoms of COPD, to come forward and do the breathing test.

The spirometry test used to be not widely available, especially in primary care. This year, our association, together with pharmaceutical companies, provided handheld spirometers to GPs. At the same time, we are raising awareness about COPD to encourage patients who are at risk to come and be tested.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* What are the treatment options for COPD?

*Dr Ong:* Currently, smoking cessation is advised. A lot of people may not be able to quit smoking so easily. There are medications to help them quit successfully.

Smoking cessation is very important to prevent the disease from worsening. If they already quit and they are still symptomatic, they are given inhaler medications, which we call bronchodilators, for example, tiotropium (Spiriva) to make it easier for the patient to breathe.

Professional help can be tapped for smoking cessation. However, they are underutilised. It can come from doctors, nurses and pharmacists. There is also a Health Promotion Board (HPB) quit line that they can call free of charge. According to a survey sponsored by Pfizer, most Singaporeans would not seek professional help when they want to quit. Most would prefer to seek help from family, friends and the media.

In the late stages of the disease, they may need oxygen therapy continuously. When a big part of the lungs are destroyed, there are surgical modalities that a person can consider.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* What are the non-drug interventions for COPD management?

*Dr Ong:* Besides medicines, regular exercise helps. Pulmonary rehabilitation provides patients with regular exercise training, physiotherapy, breathing exercises, education and lifestyle modification (quitting smoking).

These rehabilitation programmes can help COPD patients and they can improve their quality of life significantly.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* How important is smoking cessation in COPD management?

*Dr Ong:* The earlier they quit, the decline of their lung disease will be slower. It will

still progress, unfortunately, but at a slower rate. So if we can diagnose the person early and get the person to quit, that person can have a normal lifespan and even avoid suffering later on in life.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* What are the medications to help patients quit smoking effectively?

*Dr Ong:* There are nicotine replacement therapies, which come in the form of a gum, in a shape of a cigarette and patches. Then there are oral medications that can help to reduce the urge to smoke when they stop smoking. There are two in the market, one is varenicline (Champix), the other one is bupropion (Zyban).

These tablets do not contain nicotine and work on the nicotinic receptors in the brain when the patients decide to quit. It helps to encourage abstinence from smoking through a unique dual mode of action – it not only provides relief from craving and withdrawal symptoms but also reduces the pleasurable effects of smoking. This helps patients to cope better with nicotine withdrawal.

*Ezyhealth & Beauty:* How do you foresee COPD management in the near future?

*Dr Ong:* I can see a change by now because I can see more emphasis on COPD. Previously, more attention was given to lung cancer and smoking. In fact, there are more COPD sufferers than lung cancer sufferers. There are more COPD deaths than lung cancer deaths worldwide. ♥

