

TOWARDS ZERO ASTHMA DEATH

By Agency for Integrated Care and Dr Lim Hui Fang (Programme Director) of Singapore National Asthma Programme (SNAP)

Despite the high prevalence of asthma (5% in adults and 20% in children), many asthmatics do not realise that asthma is a chronic airway disease and therefore under-report their symptoms, leading to suboptimal diagnosis and treatment. They tolerate persistent symptoms as being normal, harbour misconceptions about the “severe side effects” of inhaled corticosteroids, and perceive maintenance asthma treatment as being “dependent on steroid inhalers”, preferring to rely on short-acting bronchodilators that cannot control their asthma. As such, Singapore’s emergency department attendances and hospitalisation rates for asthma are 2-3x higher than our counterparts in Australia, Japan and Europe. While Singapore’s asthma fatality rates have dropped from 5 per 100,000 in the 1990s to 1.2 per 100,000 total population in 2015 (data from healthdata.org), which is on par with developed countries, many of these deaths occurred in mild cases and were preventable. The discrepancy between perceived and actual asthma control underscores the importance of adherence, health literacy and misinformation.

The new aims of the Singapore National Asthma Programme (SNAP), an MOH funded taskforce, are to develop integrated asthma workflows between public institutions and general practitioners (GPs), to provide high-value asthmatic care to all asthmatics. An effective education program, implemented within the healthcare infrastructure, is required to effect sustainable change in doctor-patient behaviour and impact health outcomes. Singapore General Hospital and SNAP will co-organise the annual World Asthma Day on 4 May 2019, as part of our public engagement efforts. A dedicated SNAP page will be developed on Primary Care Pages to provide more information about asthma where printable materials and inhaler technique videos will be made available for GPs to share with their patients. Through the use of various education platforms, we hope to increase public awareness of asthma and the risk of poor control, so as to empower patients with self-management skills.

As 80% of asthma cases are managed in primary care, GPs are well-placed to contribute to our vision to deliver high-value and cost-effective care to asthmatics and reduce their disease burden. In addition to education efforts and workflow integration, SNAP seeks to align with and empower GPs by working with MOH to address the current gaps in resources e.g. spirometry, fragmented drug subsidies, training for clinic assistants.

Asthma in Singapore is a prevalent problem of a significant magnitude. The challenges of high asthma burden can be surmounted if everyone is united in achieving the goal of World Asthma Day – “Towards Zero Asthma Death”.



Dr Tan Tze Lee is a family physician in private practice in Choa Chu Kang. A GP at heart, he believes strongly in family medicine provided by family physicians embedded in the community. In this issue, Dr Tan shares more about his role as a member of the SNAP committee.

Q How long have you been on the SNAP committee? What motivated you to join SNAP?

A I have been part of the SNAP team since May 2018; being on the SNAP committee allows me to play a key role in contributing to the improvement of asthma care in Singapore.

Q How are you involved in the implementation of SNAP?

A In my capacity as co-chair of the team developing the Asthma Appropriate Care Guide 2019, I liaise with various stakeholders in the healthcare sector as we work towards providing concise and evidence-based recommendations on care practices for asthmatic patients. I am also involved in providing training for fellow GPs to keep them up-to-date with the best practices for asthma control.

Q What do you envision good asthma care in primary care to be?

A Being the first point of contact for most patients in the community, family physicians are well positioned to provide holistic care for asthmatic patients. My vision for SNAP is that it will equip family physicians in Singapore with knowledge regarding best practices in primary care for patients. This is so we may minimise reliance on use of SABA inhalers, and achieve our goal of “Zero Asthma Death”.

