

By Ms Amelia Sim

Neighbourhood Health Screening

The needy, and especially the needy elderly, form a crucial group of people who should be screened for health problems. Lowered socioeconomic background coupled with old age, puts these people at a higher risk of having undetected chronic diseases. However, we often find that it is this same group who avoid or do not regularly go for health screenings. This is likely due to the fear that they will not be able to afford medical treatment even if their health problems are diagnosed.

Neighbourhood Health Screening (NHS) is an initiative started in 2008 by a group of medical students from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore. This initiative consists of a series of door-to-door health screenings aimed at early detection and intervention of chronic diseases. NHS's philosophy is that by reaching out to the needy resident directly from his doorstep, we can breach both the physical and communicative distance between him and our healthcare system, a common problem faced even today. Our main target group is the lower-income elderly, and our focus is on chronic diseases commonly found in the local population, which includes obesity, hypertension and diabetes mellitus (type 2).

From January to May 2008, we have held 4 health screenings sessions in HDB blocks 116, 117, 118, 121 and 122 of Taman Jurong, Ho Ching Road. These blocks consist of either heavily subsidised rental flats or 2-room flats. On the days of screening, our teams of volunteers, consisting of medical students, nursing students, RC members and tertiary students, are sent out to the targeted HDB blocks to screen residents unit-by-unit. Walk-in



screenings for residents from other blocks are also catered for at our headquarters located at the void deck.

A health screening consists of several components. We carry out a questionnaire-based screening designed to pick up warning signs of pre-existing chronic diseases. The questionnaire also serves

to give us a better understanding of social aspects such as the resident's diet, lifestyle and physical fitness. At the same time, our volunteers pick up cues on aspects that the resident may need help in, that is, if he is living in squalid conditions without proper care or is unable to perform basic "Activities of Daily Living", and direct such cases to the Taman Jurong Community Centre's Welfare Committee for social assistance. Additional components include screening for obesity, hypertension and diabetes mellitus. Volunteers also provide health advice on Pap smears, mammograms and fecal occult blood tests to residents.

When warning signs of pre-existing diseases are picked up via screening, the resident is referred to volunteer doctors stationed at our headquarters at the void-deck for a free consultation. The doctors confirm the accuracy of warning signs, manage any pre-existing cases or complications and help to assuage any fears of the resident regarding his health. When required, referrals are also written to hospitals or polyclinics which we help keep track of and manage.

During the previous 4 health screening sessions, 357 residents from 270 units were screened. Approximately half of the residents screened were seen by volunteer doctors for pre-existing health complaints or health problems which were detected during screening. A total of 91 referrals were given



Amelia Sim is a third year medical student at Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore. She is an alumni of Victoria Junior College and Raffles Girls' Secondary School. Her hobbies include yoga, cooking good food and eating good food.



Medical students conduct door-to-door screenings, reaching out to needy residents, especially the lower-income elderly.

out to polyclinics or specialist clinics in hospitals for further follow-up.

Residents' feedback indicated that the door-to-door health screening format has been well-received. Most residents have also expressed that they would be interested in participating in future similar health screenings. Currently, we are looking into establishing a comprehensive follow-up system which can be put in place after the screenings to ensure continuity. Part of this follow-up system includes home visits by student volunteers gathered by the RC, to residents who require social assistance.

Residents who were issued referrals earlier are also currently being managed by the Taman Jurong Community Centre's Welfare Committee to ensure that financial assistance is rendered to those who need help coping with their medical bills.

As NHS is a purely non-profit, voluntary initiative organised by medical students, we rely on the general goodwill of the medical community to make this initiative successful in the long run. Our volunteers – medical students, nursing students and doctors alike – are crucial to how impactful these health screenings turn out to be. ■

If you are interested in volunteering for future health screenings, kindly contact us at neighbourhoodhealthscreening@gmail.com. We are also contactable through snail mail (address below). Aid in the form of medical equipment and supplies are also much appreciated.

(Attn: NUS Medical Society, Neighbourhood Health Screening (NHS), c/o Dean's office, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent Singapore 119260)

