

EDITORIAL

Health, nutrition and age-associated illnesses: The way forward

The elderly population in the world is on the rise over the past few decades due to improved quality of life, better medical care and reduced birth rates (United Nations, 2019). Nearly two-thirds of the elderly population lives in the developing world (United Nations, 2017) and Sri Lanka is also predicted to experience the same trend in the future (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 2016). Hence, there is a possibility of an overall increase of the length of the lifetime spent poor if the living environment and the economic status are unsatisfactory. As a result, a clear rise of a myriad of aging-associated illnesses and impairments; non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes mellitus, ischemic heart disease, chronic kidney disease, cancer, and osteoporosis, and cognitive deterioration, dementia, and sarcopenia can be expected (Roberts et al., 2021).

Unhealthy, energy dense-diet that is poor in other nutrients is a leading cause for these chronic illnesses and is believed to be linked to chronic low-grade inflammation (Phillips et al., 2019). Consumption of a pro-inflammatory diet, high in fat, salt, sugar and frequent ultra-processed food low in nutrients poses the risk of chronic diseases. There is plenty of evidence suggesting poor dietary intake of macronutrients, micronutrients and other non-nutritive bioactive compounds by older adults and elderly, not only in poor middle and low-income countries, (Gupta et al., 2017) but also in developed countries (Bird et al., 2017).

Personalized nutritional interventions are of great benefit to attenuate the development of age-associated illnesses and related functional loss and poor quality of life. A balanced and healthy diet that possesses minimal pro-inflammatory potential is beneficial (Roberts et al., 2021). Mediterranean diet appears to be protective, increasing the quality of the diet and good quality of life in the elderly (Govindaraju et al., 2018).

National nutrition strategies are currently in place to enhance healthy aging in the light of preventing associated chronic illnesses. In fulfilling the requirement, the latest version of Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG) for Sri Lankans (Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka, 2021) has paid special attention to both adult and elderly nutrition. All stakeholders should pay careful thought to facilitating and providing a nutritious diet through specific interventions accompanied by refined lifestyle to preserve functionality and to delay the progression of age-associated chronic illnesses among the elderly.

Health and welfare facilities in the country require meticulous scrutiny, revision, and upgrading to minimize the unwanted costs incurred on the healthcare system. Moreover, early attention saves the productive years of the older adults or elderly. That enables them to contribute for the growth of the national economy.

A sound healthcare policy leading to the establishment and the maintenance of a strong primary health care system is of utmost importance in the implementation of proper nutrition throughout life cycle. Appropriate execution of community-level nutrition clinics/centers is an essential need to conduct direct dietary assessments, nutrition screening including necessary laboratory investigations (blood lipids, micronutrient level, serum albumin etc), to do appropriate nutritional and healthcare interventions for vulnerable population as elderly. The implementation of such a robust system appears to be an additional burden to the existing system; however, it definitely is an investment. Primordial prevention would certainly cut down most of the healthcare cost incurred in Sri Lanka due to age-associated chronic illnesses of which poor nutrition is a modifiable risk factor. The creation of a

dedicated national-level institute to develop, and implement policies regarding nutrition and to conduct, monitor and coordinate all nutrition/food and health related programs is a promising initiative that has not been given any consideration in the Sri Lankan context.

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