

# Caring for the Active Elderly

Singapore's population demographic is undergoing a major transformation, with the number of senior citizens aged 65 years or older projected to double from 430,000 in 2014 to 900,000 in 2030. Meanwhile, evidence suggests that more people from the baby boomer generation are taking up exercise routines to stay healthy. A People's Association spokesperson told TODAY newspaper in 2016 that the number of seniors participating in fitness classes at community centres across the country has increased a hundredfold from 150 in 2011 to around 15,000 in November 2015.

This upward trend is not just seen in the elderly. The 2014 Sports Index Survey conducted by Sport Singapore showed that 38% of respondents engaged in sporting activities at least three times a week, compared with just 16% in 2001. This twofold increase in regular sports participation is expected to gain momentum as the government continues to promote an active lifestyle as part of its strategy in the war against diabetes and other chronic diseases.

However, in tandem with this increase in exercise participation, the number of sports and exercise-related injuries in the older age groups also appears to be increasing. Tan Tock Seng Hospital's physiotherapy department reported in 2016 that the number of older people referred for treatment has doubled since 2011, with the most common injuries being joint-related issues (especially at the knees), muscle strains and injuries resulting from overuse.

Injuries such as these can often be managed effectively at the primary care level by physicians with the essential sports medicine skills, which would free up capacity in the sports medicine specialist clinics to manage more complex cases. Even in current practice, musculoskeletal conditions form a significant proportion of cases seen by the general practitioner. According to Adj. Associate Professor Benedict Tan, Chief of Sports Medicine at Changi General Hospital, who is also an Asian Games Gold medallist and Olympian in the sport of sailing, "Sports injuries see better outcomes when given prompt attention, and that is why primary care doctors need to be better equipped to manage these injuries."

In addition, apart from advocating prompt care for musculoskeletal injuries, the international sports medicine community has, for more than a decade,

been developing programmes to promote exercise prescription as an alternative or adjunct to drug prescription for the prevention and treatment of chronic disease and falls. The skills inherent in sports medicine practice are highly relevant as our system for care delivery makes a strategic shift from "healthcare" to "health" to better address the challenges posed by a fast ageing society.

## **Demand outstrips capacity of sports medicine services**

Sports medicine care is currently accessible at specialist clinics in a few public hospitals and private clinics run by fewer than 30 registered sports medicine specialists. This small pool of specialists serves the general public, the military, the police, artistic and athletic populations, and also provides medical support for major sporting events. The mismatch is likely to increase exponentially in the next 10 to 20 years as demand by the general public in particular continues to rise. It therefore behoves us to increase the complementary pool of primary care practitioners with relevant sports medicine skills and knowledge to help meet demand.

## **New certification in sports medicine**

To fulfil this objective, the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKCMedicine), Nanyang Technological University, in partnership with Changi General Hospital's Department of Sports Medicine, launched Asia's first Graduate Diploma in Sports Medicine (GDSM) programme for doctors, including general practitioners and family physicians.

The SMC-accredited one-year programme, which will have its inaugural intake in July 2018, aims to equip physicians with knowledge and skills to manage musculoskeletal injuries. Participants will also be trained to prescribe exercise as a tool for chronic disease prevention and management.

## **Making sports medicine accessible to all**

Bringing sports medicine into the heartlands and making services easily accessible to the general public is an essential component to achieve the government's vision of delivering health to all Singaporeans and galvanise its effort against the onslaught of chronic disease. With better and timelier care, there can be optimism that more Singaporeans will lead increasingly active and engaged lives even as they live longer.