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# Save your kidneys, save the planet

If caught early, kidney disease can be managed before multiple complications set in, including end-stage kidney failure that requires resource-intensive dialysis.

Commentary by Dr ALBERT HING (WONG)

EACH year, World Kidney Day (marked on March 12) reminds us of an organ we often take for granted, until something goes wrong.

The theme for 2026, “Kidney Health for All: Caring for People, Protecting the Planet”, highlights a powerful idea: that protecting kidney health is not only about preventing disease, but also about safeguarding communities and building more sustainable healthcare systems.

Kidney disease is often called a silent disease because many patients do not experience symptoms until significant damage has already occurred.

By the time it is detected, some patients may already require dialysis or other intensive treatment.

That is why early screening and greater public awareness are so important, as they allow us to identify kidney problems earlier and intervene before complications develop.

Indeed, chronic kidney disease (CKD) is becoming one of Malaysia’s most pressing public health challenges.

## Rising numbers

According to the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), one in 10 adults suffers from CKD.

Over the past decade, the numbers have risen sharply.

Data from the National Health and Morbidity Survey shows that the frequency of CKD in Malaysia increased from 9.1% in 2011 to 15.5% in 2018.

At the same time, cases of end-stage kidney disease (ESKD) – the stage where kidneys can no longer function adequately – have also grown rapidly.

According to the Malaysian

Dialysis and Transplant Registry, 7,967 new patients began dialysis in 2015, and by the end of 2016, there were 39,711 Malaysians receiving dialysis treatment.

If the trend continues unchecked, projections estimate that ESKD cases could reach as high as 106,000 by 2040, placing immense pressure on the healthcare system, with treatment costs potentially reaching RM3.2bil.

As of January, the NKF Dialysis Centres oversee a network of 32 facilities, supporting a total of 1,788 patients in managing their dialysis treatment.

Much of this rise is driven by Malaysia’s growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), particularly diabetes.

In fact, about 65% of new ESKD cases in Malaysia are linked to diabetes, making it the single largest cause of kidney failure.

## Interconnected diseases

Kidney disease rarely develops in isolation.

It sits at the centre of a complex network of conditions known as cardio-renal-metabolic diseases, which include diabetes, hypertension (high blood pressure), cardiovascular (heart) disease and obesity.

These conditions are deeply interconnected.

For instance, diabetes can damage the kidneys over time.

As kidney function declines, blood pressure becomes harder to control.

High blood pressure then further damages kidney tissue and places additional strain on the heart.

What begins as one condition often becomes a chain reaction.

Globally, this challenge is equally significant.

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies kidney

disease as an escalating global health crisis, noting that it is among the world’s fastest-rising causes of death.

It is, in fact, on track to rank as the fifth leading cause of death by 2050.

Recognising these connections is crucial.

Protecting kidney health early not only safeguards the kidneys, it also helps protect heart health, metabolic balance and overall well-being.

And increasingly, it also means protecting something even broader: the sustainability of our healthcare systems and the planet itself.

## Early action protects patients

For individuals living with CKD, the most powerful outcome of early detection is time.

When kidney disease is identified early, particularly among people with diabetes or hypertension, healthcare professionals can introduce treatments that help slow disease progression.

These include medication, lifestyle changes and regular monitoring.

Dialysis is life-saving, but it requires regular treatment sessions, often several times a week.

These sessions can significantly affect daily routines, work schedules and family life.

Delaying dialysis allows patients to maintain independence for longer, continuing their careers, caring for loved ones and enjoying everyday activities.

Because CKD is part of the wider cardio-renal-metabolic network, managing kidney health early also helps prevent complications in other parts of the body.

Healthy kidneys help regulate blood pressure, reduce strain on the heart, and support metabolic balance.

There is also an important emotional dimension.

Chronic illnesses often create anxiety and uncertainty for both patients and caregivers.

Preventing complications and reducing hospital visits can help patients maintain confidence, stability and control over their health journey.

## Hidden environmental impact

While the personal impact of kidney disease is widely recognised, its environmental impact is less often discussed.

Advanced kidney treatments, particularly dialysis, are highly resource-intensive.

Each haemodialysis session requires large amounts of purified water and electricity.

Globally, research has shown that a single dialysis session can use hundreds of litres of water, along with energy-intensive equipment and disposable medical supplies.

Over time, this results in substantial water consumption, energy use and medical waste.

Hospital care also generates large volumes of single-use medical products and biohazard waste.

By detecting CKD earlier and slowing its progression, healthcare systems can reduce the need for these resource-intensive treatments.

This highlights an important idea that is gaining global attention: preventive healthcare is also climate-conscious healthcare.

## Convenient screening locations

Despite the growing burden of CKD in Malaysia, awareness and screening remain low, with many people only diagnosed at later stages because the disease

develops silently.

Early screening is therefore essential, as simple tests can detect kidney damage before symptoms appear.

For many Malaysians, scheduling a hospital visit for routine screening can feel time-consuming.

Community retail pharmacies can help bridge this gap as they are among the most accessible healthcare touchpoints in neighbourhoods across the country.

They provide convenient locations where individuals can take proactive steps toward monitoring their health without long waiting times.

By offering screening services closer to where people live and work, pharmacies can help detect kidney disease earlier, before it progresses into a medical crisis.

If you are over the age of 40, living with diabetes or high blood pressure, or have a family history of kidney disease, regular health screenings are strongly recommended.

Sometimes, the most important step is also the simplest: check your kidney health with a simple screening at your local pharmacy.

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