

Long road to treatment

Distance still a major hurdle as foundation works to expand equitable kidney care across Sarawak



Patients undergo dialysis treatments at the NKF-Kidney Association of Sarawak/Rotary centre in Kuching.



CHOO KOK MING

FOR many kidney patients, dialysis is not a treatment that they can take lightly, or postpone at will.

It is a life-sustaining routine that must be followed several times a week, often for hours at a time.

For those living far from major towns, the burden does not begin at the dialysis chair – it begins on the road.

In Sarawak, where communities are spread across a vast landscape, distance remains one of the biggest barriers to kidney care.

Patients from the rural and semi-rural areas often have to travel long distances to reach treatment centres, adding transport costs, time away from work and physical strain to an already difficult medical journey.

This is the gap the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) Malaysia hopes to narrow as it continues expanding dialysis access in the state.

Urgent need

According to NKF Malaysia chief executive officer Choo Kok Ming, the need in Sarawak is pressing, with about 4,800 dialysis patients currently in the state and another 700 to 800 new cases of kidney failure reported each year.

“Most facilities are concentrated in the larger towns, which forces patients in the rural areas to travel long distances for treatment,” he said in an interview with the *Sundaypost*.

At present, NKF operates three dialysis centres in Sarawak: Pusat Dialisis NKF Sarikei; Pusat Dialisis NKF – KAS (Unit 2) in Kota Samarahan; and Pusat Dialisis NKF – Kidney Association of Sarawak/Rotary in Kuching.

Together, these centres support nearly 200 patients who require regular dialysis.

Sarikei currently treats 36 patients, Kota Samarahan serves 58, while the Kuching centre accommodates 101 patients.

Each centre provides dialysis three times a week for every patient, ensuring continuity of care without lengthy waiting periods.

For Choo, expanding dialysis access in Sarawak is not merely about increasing the number of machines or centres – it is about fairness.

He pointed out that Sarawak’s dialysis treatment rate remained lower than many states across Peninsular Malaysia, with 242 new dialysis patients per million population recorded in 2024, against 385 in Negeri Sembilan, and 379 in Melaka.

This, however, did not mean that Sarawak had a lower burden, said Choo.

“Rather, it reflects the challenges of access.”

“Unlike other smaller states, Sarawak is geographically vast, with many patients living in the rural or remote areas.

“Distance, infrastructure, and concentration of facilities in urban centres all contribute to lower treatment uptake.

“By establishing another dialysis centre, NKF aims to help bridge this access gap.

“It is part of our broader commitment to equity, ensuring that Sarawakians, regardless of geography, have a fair chance to

receive life-sustaining treatment closer to home,” he said.

Cost of distance

For patients, such difference can be life-changing.

Dialysis is typically required three times a week, with each session lasting about four hours.

With travelling time factored in, a single treatment day can become an all-day ordeal, especially for those who rely on family members or public transport.

Choo said bringing dialysis closer to home could ease both the financial and emotional burden on patients and their families.

“The centre can make a real difference. Instead of enduring hours of travelling multiple times a week, patients can now undergo dialysis near home, saving both time and money. For dialysis, consistency is critical,” he said.

Affordability is another major concern.

Dialysis is life-sustaining, but it is also a long-term, resource-intensive treatment.

Choo pointed out: “NKF works to keep dialysis accessible by heavily subsidising treatment costs through fundraising and government support.

“As such, patients and families pay only a fraction of the actual cost, while some may receive fully subsidised care.”

NKF’s subsidised treatment is intended for patients from low and middle-income groups who face financial difficulty in accessing long-term dialysis care.

To ensure fairness, the foundation’s welfare department conducts a means test that looks into household income, family background and overall financial situation.

Priority is given to vulnerable patients, including those who are sole breadwinners or have dependents still in school.

“Patients are typically referred by government hospitals or nephrologists, and once accepted, they receive the same high standard of care as all NKF patients, regardless of their financial background.

“More importantly, these subsidies are made possible

through the generous contributions of corporate sponsors and individual donors,” Choo said.

He said the model not only eased the financial burden off needy families, but also reflected NKF’s mission of making dialysis accessible and equitable across Malaysia.

‘Care beyond the dialysis chair’

However, Choo stressed that modern kidney care should extend beyond dialysis alone.

At NKF, he said the idea of a state-of-the-art centre was not limited to equipment, but also included comprehensive and patient-centred care.

“All of our centres, including those in Sarawak, are equipped with modern dialysis machines and supported by technologies such as ultrasound equipment to enhance patient safety and monitoring.

“We also provide holistic support, with dietetic guidance and mental health services integrated into our care model.

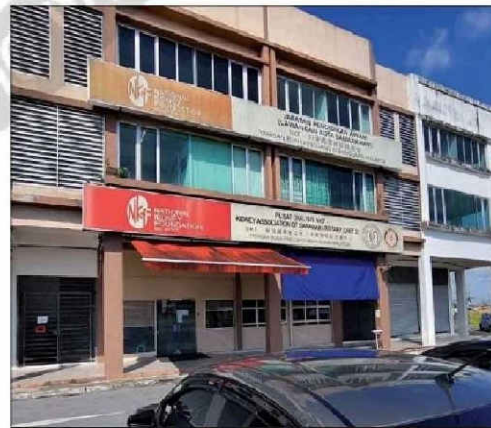
“Combined with our emphasis on single-use dialysers and strict infection control, these elements ensure that the patients receive the same high standard of safe, affordable, and compassionate treatment across all NKF centres nationwide,” he said.

Patients also have access to dietary counselling, where trained dietitians provide personalised guidance on nutrition and meal planning to help manage their condition.

Health education programmes, including workshops and one-to-one sessions, also help patients and their families better understand kidney disease, recognise possible complications, and make healthier lifestyle choices.

“Our aim is not only to sustain life with dialysis, but also to enhance quality of life, promote independence, and support the well-being of both patients and their families,” Choo said.

Staffing specialised medical centres outside major urban areas could be challenging, but Choo said NKF addressed this by recruiting locally whenever possible and providing structured



Most facilities that provide dialysis treatment in Sarawak are concentrated in the larger towns.

training.

“All nurses and dialysis technicians undergo training under NKF’s Training Department, with ongoing collaboration with local hospitals for knowledge sharing and referral pathways.

“Continuous professional development is also provided through refresher courses, workshops and hands-on guidance from senior staff.

“This ensures that, regardless of location, patients can be confident that the care they receive meets the same high standards across all our centres,” he added.

Prevention

The broader challenge, however, begins long before a patient needs dialysis.

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is an escalating concern nationwide.

Nationally, CKD prevalence rose from about nine per cent in 2011 to more than 15 per cent in 2018, with the figure continuing to climb.

“Diabetes and hypertension remain the leading causes of kidney failure, making prevention and early detection critical,” said Choo.

Based on the National Health

and Morbidity Survey 2023 and data from the National Renal Registry, diabetes affected 15.6 per cent of Malaysian adults, or about one in seven adults, while hypertension affected 29.2 per cent, or roughly one in three adults.

CKD was estimated at 15.5 per cent, close to one in six adults.

“These numbers are not just statistics,” stressed Choo.

“They reflect the fact that millions of Malaysians are at risk, and many do not even realise they already have early-stage kidney disease.

“So our most critical message is this: protect your kidneys by controlling blood sugar and blood pressure from the start.

“Regular health screenings, adopting healthier eating habits, staying active, and following medical advice can significantly reduce the risk of CKD and improve quality of life,” he advised.

Choo said one of the biggest national challenges in kidney disease management was that many people remained undiagnosed until the disease had reached an advanced stage.

“CKD is often silent in its early stages. Without regular health screenings, patients may only discover the disease when their

kidneys are already severely impaired.”

The rising prevalence of diabetes and hypertension continues to drive CKD cases, while access to affordable long-term treatment remains a major challenge.

With nearly 50,000 patients on dialysis in Malaysia today, Choo said the financial and logistical burden remained significant.

At the same time, encouraging Malaysians to adopt healthier diets, reduce salt and sugar intakes, exercise regularly and go for annual health checks also remained an uphill task that required sustained education and cultural change.

“At NKF, we are working to address these challenges not only by providing dialysis treatment, but also by investing in awareness campaigns, prevention programmes, and patient support systems to reduce the overall burden of kidney disease in Malaysia,” said Choo.

‘A future where geography matters less’

Looking ahead, NKF envisions a more equitable and accessible kidney care system in Sarawak over the next decade.

“We hope to expand our network of dialysis centres so that patients would not have to travel long distances for treatment.

“Beyond these physical centres, NKF also aims to strengthen public health initiatives, including health screenings in high-risk communities and education campaigns on diabetes, hypertension and kidney health.

“Training more healthcare staff through NKF’s own capacity-building efforts will also be important to ensure that Sarawak has a skilled local workforce to support patients.

“Ultimately, our goal is to reduce the burden of kidney disease in Sarawak by combining treatment, prevention, and education, so that in the future, fewer people will require dialysis while those who do can receive care closer to home,” said Choo.

His message to the public and potential donors is simple.

“Kidney disease can be prevented, and patients who are already on dialysis should not have to face the journey alone.

“Every contribution, whether big or small, goes directly into sustaining treatment and improving quality of life for patients who often come from very modest backgrounds.

“By supporting NKF, you are not just funding dialysis machines or medical care. You are giving families hope, time, and a future.

“Our call to action is simple: take care of your kidneys, and if you are able, help us take care of others. Together, we can make a difference.”