



OPINION

Liak Teng Lit

# Prevention is Better Than Cure



“It takes a village to look after the frail elderly and to look after one another.”

Cities must find ways to address healthcare challenges that go beyond the provision of healthcare facilities. A better way is to create health-promoting environments that prevent people from falling ill in the first place. **Liak Teng Lit**, former Chairman of the National Environment Agency of Singapore and Chief Executive Officer of various public hospitals in Singapore, explains how.

## Healthcare Challenges

We are genetically programmed for a different world. Genes that were important for our ancestors in a world of scarcity, where they were driven to consume large amounts of high energy and salty food for survival, have led people to overeat in our modern context when such food is now overabundant. Obesity has become a global epidemic, leading to major chronic illnesses such as diabetes.

In addition, lack of courage in society to address end-of-life issues has resulted in the mindless extension of lives, with many of the elderly “living” out their last years severely demented, bedridden, in pain and with little meaningful interaction with others.

Also, in many cities, healthcare resources are concentrated in a small number of acute care general hospitals that are often located in or around the city centre. Smaller regional or community hospitals are in turn under-

developed and under-resourced. Patients who live far from the city centre are forced to travel great distances to visit the large hospitals for relatively simple or routine tests and minor surgeries.

Much of what we term “healthcare” is in fact “illness care”, where we fix what has gone awry. But spending on illness care does not correlate well with actual quality of health. The United States spends one of the highest amounts in the world on healthcare—but Americans’ health are far from stellar. Overspending on illness care diverts resources from other essential investments, some of which are equally or even more important for population health.

In the face of a chronically ill and rapidly ageing population, the solution is not to spend more on healthcare facilities. Prevention is better than cure—a health-promoting environment is the first line of defence.

## Strategies Beyond Healthcare

### *People-centric planning*

Healthcare resources should be distributed based on residents' needs, and performance targets should be set. For example, for patients to be conveyed from their home to the hospital in emergencies within 10 min, the hospital should be no more than 8 km away. For healthcare facilities to be accessible within 10 min by public transport, they should be no further than 2 km away. This applies to facilities providing diagnostic and treatment services for most chronic diseases and minor surgical procedures, and nursing homes. Finally, for facilities to be accessible within 10 min by foot or wheelchair, they should ideally be no further than 200–300 m away.

### *Enable self-care and community care*

For many patients with chronic diseases, the best care is self-care. For the frail elderly and the dying, the best care is often care given by family members and neighbours, at home and within the community. Such care is often available immediately, and is personal and cost-effective.

### *Promote healthy eating and exercise*

Access to healthy food is important for health. Cities should be planned to enable preferential access to fresh food in the community. Community gardens and farms can also produce a significant amount of fresh vegetables, fruit and fish for local consumption. Easy access to recreational facilities like parks and well-shaded public spaces will encourage people to exercise and go outdoors.

### *Human-scale communities bring people together*

Good relationships and regular social interaction with others are key determinants of well-being, health and longevity. Therefore, it is important to design the living environment to encourage interactions. Neighbours are more likely to know and care for one another if they live within a community with fewer than 2,000–3,000 people.

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One way is to create ample positive spaces that encourage residents to linger and interact with one another. Places like convenience stores, hair salons, coffee shops, playgrounds and even comfortable seating in the neighbourhood provide a vibrant environment that would draw residents out of their homes.

A recent prototype of a “vertical village for the future” is Kampung Admiralty, a precinct in Singapore. The variety of public spaces found there, from a large 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> community plaza, to a community farm and even small intimate spaces appears to have encouraged much interaction among residents. Co-location of childcare, senior care and activity centres, has also facilitated natural mixing between the young and old.

## It Takes a Village

A healthy city needs much more than hospitals, clinics and other healthcare facilities. It also needs to have health-promoting features that encourage people to be physically active, eat healthily, stay socially engaged and connected to one another, contribute and be happy.

Health and happiness are closely linked to our sense of control and sense of contributions. A healthy community needs to have the “heartware” that can engage everyone in the community. Traditional villages, especially in agrarian societies, have evolved ways for everyone to find their own ways to participate and contribute to the rest of the community. The same goes for modern cities. Creating human-scale communities that encourage people to get together and care for one another is an important first step. It takes a village to raise a child. It also takes a village to look after the frail elderly and to look after one another. 