

MMA: Malaysia Must Strengthen Lifestyle-Based Mental Health Strategies

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KUALA LUMPUR – Malaysia must strengthen lifestyle-based mental health strategies as rising depression and workplace stress continue to strain the nation, said Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Datuk Dr R. Thirunavukarasu.

In his address at the opening of the 5th Malaysian Lifestyle Medicine Conference, he said mental health has become a “frontline challenge,” with the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023 showing that one in three Malaysians experiences mental health issues.

According to Dr Thirunavukarasu, depression rates have doubled since 2019, while nearly half of young adults have reported thoughts of self-harm.

“These numbers are not just statistics. They are our students, our doctors, our colleagues and our patients,” he said, adding that RM14.5 billion in annual productivity losses are linked to mental health conditions.

He said lifestyle medicine can help address the root causes of distress, noting that about 30 per cent of health outcomes are shaped by diet, physical activity, sleep, and stress management.

“This is not about replacing medication. It is about addressing what medication alone cannot — the root causes,” he said.

He said the MMA supports stronger workplace well-being policies, burnout-prevention measures, and the integration of lifestyle medicine into clinical guidelines, CME (Continuing Medical Education) modules, and employer-based health schemes.

The MMA president added that mental health among healthcare workers must be prioritised, noting that a study by the American Medical Association in the United States found that around 50 per cent of doctors experience burnout, underscoring a global issue that Malaysia must address.

Meanwhile, conference organising chair and Malaysian Society of Lifestyle Medicine (MSLM) founding president, Dr Siva Poobalasingam, who is also the Chair, Advisory Board, Lifestyle Medicine Global Alliance, said Malaysia must act decisively to address the combined burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and worsening psychological distress.

“We are not just facing a health challenge — we are facing a human sustainability challenge. If we do not change how we live, work and connect, the mental health crisis will continue to outpace our healthcare system,” he said.

The conference also saw leading global lifestyle medicine figures in attendance, including Vice-Dean of Population Health at Weill Cornell Medicine–Qatar, Dr Ravinder Mamtani; Dr Elizabeth Frates of Harvard University; and Chief Medical Officer of Blue Zones Health®, Dr Wayne Dysinger.

During the conference, Dr Ravinder paid tribute to Dr Siva for his leadership in advancing lifestyle medicine and combating NCDs “nationally, regionally and globally,” describing his work as instrumental in strengthening the movement globally.

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