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Malaysia urged to boost lifestyle strategies for mental health crisis

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MMA calls for stronger lifestyle-based mental health strategies as depression rates double and workplace stress strains the nation's productivity.

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Medical Association has called for the strengthening of lifestyle-based mental health strategies as rising depression and workplace stress strain the nation.

MMA president Datuk Dr R. Thirunavukarasu said mental health has become a “frontline challenge”, citing the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023 which shows one in three Malaysians experiences mental health issues.

He revealed 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 in a speech at the 5th Malaysian Lifestyle Medicine Conference.

Dr Thirunavukarasu added that RM14.5 billion in annual productivity losses are linked to mental health conditions.

He noted lifestyle medicine can help address root causes, with about 30% of health outcomes 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 explained.

The MMA supports stronger workplace well-being policies, burnout-prevention measures and the integration of lifestyle medicine into clinical guidelines.

Dr Thirunavukarasu said mental health among healthcare workers must be prioritised, citing a study finding around 50% of doctors experience burnout.

Conference organising chair Dr Siva Poobalasingam said Malaysia must act decisively to address the combined burden of non-communicable diseases and psychological distress.

“We are not just facing a health challenge — we are facing a human sustainability challenge,” said the Malaysian Society of Lifestyle Medicine founding president.

He warned the mental health crisis will continue to outpace the healthcare system without changes to how people live, work and connect.

The conference featured global figures including Dr Ravinder Mamtani from Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar, who paid tribute to Dr Siva’s leadership in advancing lifestyle medicine. — Bernama