

# BEWARE OF THE SILENT KILLER

IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE COLORECTAL CANCER AWARENESS MONTH, THIS QUARTERLY DEDICATES THIS EDITORIAL SPECIAL TO RAISE THE AWARENESS OF THIS PERVALENT DISEASE. WE ALSO SPEAK TO FIVE RENOWNED COLORECTAL SURGEONS WHO SHED INSIGHTS OF THIS SILENT KILLER.

Did you know that colorectal cancer is the most common cancer in Singapore? The symptoms are generally not obvious in the early stages, making it harder to detect. To raise the awareness amongst public, the Singapore Cancer Society started the Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. Denoted by the blue ribbon, this campaign is to highlight the seriousness of this disease through various initiatives such as public forums, roadshows and broadcast advertising.

## DR. QUAH HAK MIEN

Dr. Quah Hak Mien started his current practice at Gleneagles Medical Centre last year. He was formerly a Consultant Surgeon at the Department of Colorectal Surgery in Singapore General Hospital.

He began his training in the field of colon and rectal related diseases about 10 years ago. He received most of his surgical training in Singapore but had the opportunity to train overseas both in the United Kingdom and USA. Dr. Quah did his fellowship training in Colorectal Surgery at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) the leading cancer center in America, in New York in 2006. He focused his clinical training and research on colorectal cancer, in particular, sphincter-preservative surgery for rectal cancer and recurrent pelvic cancer operations.

Since his return to Singapore, he continued to develop expertise in the laparoscopic (keyhole) surgery and single incision laparoscopic (single keyhole) surgery for colorectal cancer. His other clinical interests are in the area of functional bowel disorders and pelvic floor disorders, such as patients suffering from chronic constipation, faecal incontinence and rectal prolapse.

Dr. Quah states that colorectal cancer has overtaken lung cancer as the number one cancer in Singapore in the recent years. The numbers are also increasing every year in developed countries such as US and England. The exact reason for the rapid increase in the incidence of colorectal cancer in Singapore is still not fully understood, although lifestyle changes are probably partly responsible. "Increased intake of meat, cooked at high temperature and increased animal fat consumption may be relevant factors. Smoking has been shown to increase colorectal polyp formation, which are the precursors of cancer development," he explains.

In Singapore, colorectal cancer is more common in people after 50 years old. The Chinese have a higher risk than the Malays or Indians in Singapore. Researchers have discovered that about 5 percent of colorectal cancers had definite genetic inheritance, while another about 25 percent appeared to run in the family. Therefore, an individual with an immediate family member with colorectal cancer is at a higher risk of colorectal cancer.



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Dr. Quah Hak Mien

Dr. Quah shares two strategies to prevent colorectal cancer. First, is to reduce the risk factors. We should improve our lifestyle by cutting down on intake of red meat especially those cooked at high temperatures, as well as reducing animal fat intake. We should also exercise regularly and stop smoking.

Secondly, we have to go for regular screening to detect the cancer at an early stage where there are very effective treatment available. An individual who has any risk factors such as family history or is aged above 50 years should consult their doctor to begin screening for colorectal cancer.

These tests are used to detect polyps, cancer or other abnormalities, even when there are no symptoms. Stool occult blood test is a test used to check for very small quantities of blood in the stool that may indicate cancer. A positive test means that the individual needs to be referred for colonoscopy.

Dr. Quah believes that colorectal cancer is a preventable and very treatable condition. He is passionate to improve the public's understanding of the condition and encourage people to go for screening. He also recommends that we should look out for the symptoms of colorectal cancer, such as passage of blood in stools, a change in bowel habit and persistent abdominal pain.