How to prevent premature death: ALL or NONE

During one of my daily rounds with my resident doctors, we saw this 32-year-old man in the charity ward who had suffered an acute heart attack while he was undergoing an endoscopy to visualize the source of bleeding in his stomach. He had diabetes mellitus with complications—kidney failure, hypertension (high blood pressure), chronic obstructive lung disease or COPD, a chronic lung disease that is asthma-like, and a lung tumor. Knowing that I was the senior doctor in the team, the patient spoke to me.

Patient: “Doc, life is really hard... How am I doing?”
Me: “You are just fine, sir.”
Patient: “How come I got all of these health problems?”
Me: “One leads to another and then to the next. What we are seeing right now are all complications of diabetes, hypertension, smoking, bad diet and lifestyle. They are all linked together.”
Patient: “Bad luck?”
Me: “Yes, something like that.”

What I really wanted him to understand was that there were factors that triggered the complications—poor co-management, lack of patient’s cooperation and unhealthy habits and lifestyle.

Throughout my medical practice, I have interacted with a lot of people from all walks of life and patients with different attitudes towards their health. While we always give hope, we can’t give false hopes. We are not supposed to play God. Behavior is difficult to change. Actually, most people are aware of their poor lifestyle but it has become a matter of choice or the least priority.

I have been a director of the Philippine Heart Association for the last 7 years. We have been promoting the Advocacy tagline “Healthy Lifestyle” with the help of Healthy Lifestyle advocate partners. The singular message is “Shape up: Let’s modify our lifestyle... know your numbers and risks...see your doctor...”

Despite all our Advocacy undertakings, we realized that in the past 15 years, we still have not made a big dent in averting heart and blood vessel diseases. Risk factors for heart disease are still up. The people still do not see the value of prevention and healthy lifestyle. According to the 2008 National Nutrition and Health Survey, “more Filipinos have hypertension, high fasting blood sugar and high cholesterol and triglyceride levels, which are risk factors to cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and other lifestyle-related diseases.”

One in every four Filipino adults (25.3 percent) has hypertension, with a blood pressure reading equal to or higher than 140/90 millimeter mercury (mmHg). Three years ago, prevalence was one out of five Filipino adult was hypertensive, thus a significant 22.5 increase in prevalence was noted.

The Department of Health Mortality chart shows that the top 5 causes of death are: heart diseases, vascular system diseases, malignant neoplasm (a tumor, tissue containing a growth), pneumonia and accidents. Diabetes mellitus ranks 8th.

Hypertension, high FBS and dyslipidemia are major risk factors to lifestyle-related diseases, particularly cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus and cancer. These lifestyle-related diseases are among the diseases that currently dominate the list of leading causes of death in the country. These are also leading causes of morbidity, particularly diseases of the heart and the vascular system which are the two main leading causes.

To back my patient, who unfortunately belongs to the low social income group, I estimate that he will be spending between P500,000.00 to P1 million per year to control his conditions. About 79% of the Philippine population belongs to Class D and E. So, how can we offer them the best of care if they don’t have the capacity to pay? Therefore, prevention is still the best approach for the Filipinos.

Follow this guide on lifestyle and stay focused:

If you eat leafy vegetables 3x a day, you can prevent heart attack, stroke, cancer, nerve problems, hemorrhoids, anemias, obesity, and delay diabetes and even tooth decay. They say it is expensive? Nope. Kangkong and camote tops cost between P5 to P10 per bundle. Sauite garlic and the tops in small amount of cooking oil. Then you’re good.

If you limit eating meat especially the cured ones which are laden with preservatives, you avoid heart disease, stroke, cancer, obesity, and even some allergies. Eating them daily in small amounts will do you wonders. Replace them with fish meat. Fish, especially those coming from the deep sea, is good for the heart, blood vessels, and almost all organs— even your joints. If you are physically active, you prevent heart disease, stroke, potentially some cancers, brain aging, obesity, diabetes, joint disease and even infections.

If you don’t smoke, you prevent heart disease, stroke, cancers, ulcers, emphysema, bronchitis and infections.

Doing these 3 basic things—diet, exercise, no to tobacco—avoids majority if not all of the causes of early disability and death.

True or False:
With the proper diet, regular exercise, and avoidance of smoking, you can avoid majority, if not all, of the causes of early disability and death.

Email your answer and/or suggest a topic of interest for our column to heartline.philheartassoc@yahoo.com

Congratulations to Romeo M. Menorca for correctly answering our previous trivia question.

Dr. Eugene B. Reyes is the current PHA president. He is a heart doctor who is involved in Medical education, Cardiovascular research development and Advocacy projects that target the grassroots. His hospital affiliations are UP-Philippine General Hospital and Manila Doctors Hospital.

Heartline is an initiative of the PHA with global healthcare company MSD in their shared commitment to raise awareness on heart diseases and related illnesses. For more information, visit the PHA website at www.philheart.org.