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[The Star Online](#) > Health  
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Empowered against gut cancer



President and founder of EMPOWERED, Dr Christina Ng, announced that Empowered's customised outreach programmes have reached six large communities, reaching nearly 55,000 low income residents.

**EMPOWERED continues its fight against colorectal cancer, with another 10,000 under-resourced Malaysians reached this year.**

COLORECTAL cancer is the most common cancer affecting men, and the second commonest cancer affecting women in Malaysia. It accounts for one of the highest causes of cancer-related mortalities globally.

Although colorectal cancer screening is an established practice in developed parts of the world, it has not as yet been widely applied in most parts of the developing world. Earlier national initiatives such as the Australian Task Force and the UK Colorectal Cancer Screening Project have reported a fall in mortality through the implementation of faecal occult blood testing.

Malaysians living in under-resourced communities are faced with numerous unmet basic needs. EMPOWERED – The Cancer Advocacy Society of Malaysia has had first hand experience of their poor understanding of cancer, its prevalence and fatal outcomes if not picked up early.

EMPOWERED's tireless efforts to bridge the health gap in poor Malaysian communities since 2010 is fuelled by the many lives saved through the implementation of its early detection and treatment programmes for colorectal cancer.

Officially launched in April 2009, EMPOWERED – The Cancer Advocacy Society of Malaysia is a non-profit organisation committed to saving lives, preventing cancer and eliminating suffering amongst the poor in Malaysia.

Since 2010, EMPOWERED's incessant efforts to execute vital colorectal cancer screening and treatment programmes has reached the homes of nearly 50,000 under-privileged Malaysians.

This year, the project blueprint has been further customised to encourage maximal uptake by the residents living in EMPOWERED's target communities in Setapak, Selangor. It is working closely with Setapak community leaders to execute this year's project in four phases.

### **Phase 1 – Pre-Selection & Awareness Workshop**

- EMPOWERED works with community leaders to conduct demographic surveys that aim to identify the number of individuals at risk of developing colorectal cancer.

- Awareness workshops are organised at the communities to raise awareness about colorectal cancer through customised educational sessions on healthy diet and lifestyle issues.

### **Phase 2 – Screening Workshop**

- Screening workshops are conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil. Residents will be registered and instructed on how to use the faecal immunohistochemical test (FIT) kit.

FIT has been shown in studies to have superior detection rates of advanced colonic lesions compared with the older guaiac-based faecal occult blood test, with greater simplicity of sample collection and better patient adherence rate.

### **Phase 3 – Return of Used Test (FIT) Kits**

- Residents are given two days to have their stool sample collected using the FIT kits at home.

- Used FIT kits are dropped off by participating residents at respective collection stations within their communities. The kits are collected and sent off for processing.

### **Phase 4 – Patient Support Programme**

- EMPOWERED's volunteers from the Malaysian Enterostomal Nurses Association will break the news to affected residents, in the privacy of their homes, about positive blood findings in their stool.

- Appointments for colonoscopy at Hospital Selayang is arranged.

- Appropriate medical management is administered for all diagnosed conditions, including cancer.

- Transportation for all hospital visits is provided for these residents.

·An elaborate support mechanism is put in place to provide the beneficiaries with complete emotional and moral support throughout their medical journey.

Consultant medical oncologist Dr Christina Ng is president and founder of EMPOWERED. She shares: “In the last three years, we have seen a significant improvement in the rate of return of used FIT kits, from 66% in 2010 to 85% in 2012, by our participating subjects. I would attribute this to EMPOWERED’s continuous efforts to make this programme more tailored and personalised for our beneficiaries based on learnings from each yearly campaign.

“The rate of compliance to colonoscopic assessment for our subjects who are found to have blood in the stool remained high at about 90% every year.”

She adds: “About 7-8% of our entire population who participated in the programme tested positive for occult blood in the stool and about 1-2% of all subjects were diagnosed with asymptomatic stage 1 to 2 colorectal cancer. Those diagnosed with pre-cancerous polyps underwent appropriate endoscopic therapeutic procedures and were subsequently placed in medical surveillance programmes.

“It is interesting to note that whilst the Malays formed the largest racial group within our screened population, the Chinese subjects were more likely to have blood picked up on FIT and more likely to have significant pathology found during colonoscopic assessment, including cancer, in comparison with subjects from other racial groups.”

EMPOWERED’s efforts to enable under-resourced Malaysians make important health changes in their lives is well received on the ground.

Tan Chu Tea is a 53-year-old colorectal cancer survivor and beneficiary of EMPOWERED’s screening campaign in Nov 2011. “I am very thankful to EMPOWERED for holding this programme in our community. I have not come across a charitable organisation that is so caring and dedicated to helping the poor people by providing colon cancer screening and then making all the arrangements to send them to hospital for colonoscopy and further treatment. EMPOWERED had even paid for all our hospital fees and charges. For this, I want to say a big thank you to EMPOWERED,” he shares.

Dr Ng recognises that the support of corporate partners is critical in realising such vital initiatives.

“Outreach projects like these are critical for the well being of the community. As an organisation, we are proud to fund an initiative that opens access for all segments of Malaysians to education, information and total disease support for a morbid disease such as cancer”, said C.M. Phang, operating officer of Scientex Foundation, who is the main sponsor for EMPOWERED’s 2013 Colorectal Cancer Screening and Treatment Project.

For more information about EMPOWERED – The Cancer Advocacy Society of Malaysia, visit [www.empowered.org.my](http://www.empowered.org.my).