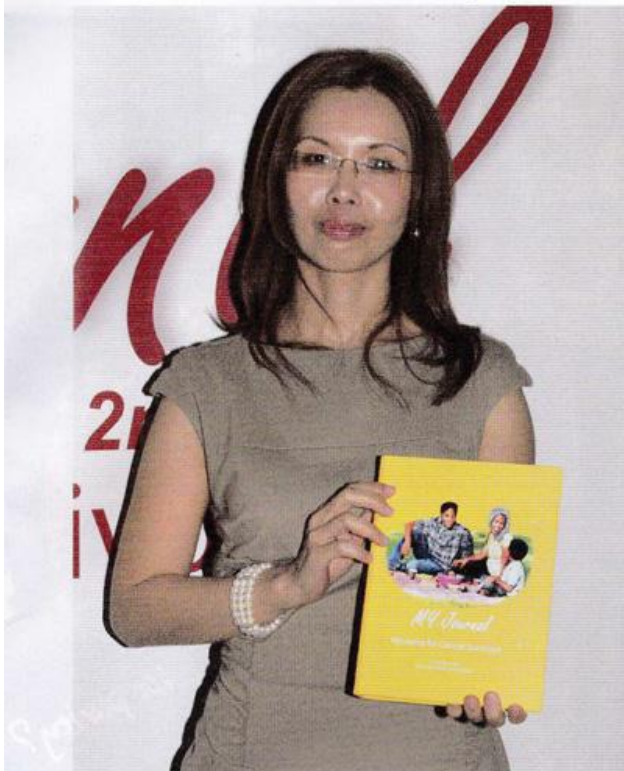


Empowering Disadvantaged Malaysians

While cancer continues to be a grave concern, not every Malaysian has equal access to information on the disease. One organisation has set out to ensure that under-resourced Malaysian communities are empowered with vital information on the “Big C” **TEXT HYMA HARIDAS**





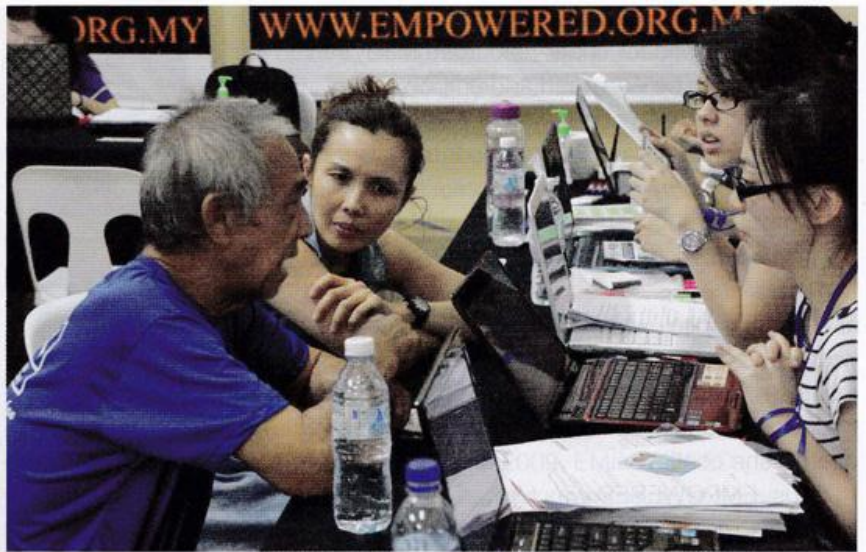
Dr. Christina Ng with a copy of My Journal

The word 'cancer' is on the lips of almost everyone these days, being one of the most feared and highly prevalent diseases of our time.

More recently, the disease grabbed the spotlight when Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie — one of the Most Beautiful Women in the World — decided to undergo a double mastectomy to prevent breast cancer. With the surgery, it is said that Jolie has been able to bring down her chances of developing breast cancer from 87 per cent to under five per cent.

"Angelina Jolie's courageous decision is to be lauded, and has brought double mastectomy into the spotlight, showing many women that it is nothing to fear or shy away from. Unfortunately, not everyone can afford a double mastectomy as a preventive measure. Those from disadvantaged or lower-income backgrounds are not even aware of treatment options available, nor do they have the financial means to pursue such a course of action," says Dr Christina Ng, President & Founder of EMPOWERED – The Cancer Advocacy Society of Malaysia.

An Australian-trained medical oncologist, Ng had a vision of providing excellent level of cancer education as well as delivering comprehensive screening and treatment programmes for all Malaysians regardless of social or economic



Volunteers talk to the participants about colorectal screening



A Colorectal Cancer Screening workshop for low-income communities

CANCER: THE SILENT KILLER

In Malaysia, a total of 18,219 new cancer cases were diagnosed and registered with the National Cancer Registry 2007, comprising about 9,123 (44.6%) males and 10,096 (55.4%) females.

The cumulative risk (CumR) was 9.6 for males and 9.9 for females, representing the risks of males and females in Malaysia developing cancer before the age of 75, in the absence of other causes of death.

The five leading cancers among the Malaysian population in 2007 for females were breast, colorectal, cervix, ovary and lungs related, whilst for males were lung, colorectal, nasopharynx, prostate and liver.

However, latest findings show that colorectal cancer has become the most common cancer in males and 2nd most common in females in this country.

background.

"I saw the need for under-resourced Malaysian communities to be equipped and empowered with vital information about cancer. I also saw the need for Malaysians living in poor conditions to be offered an opportunity to receive moral and emotional support when faced with a new diagnosis of cancer," explains Ng.

"These needs surfaced out of my experience at a local hospital, where I witnessed numerous wrong medical decisions made by under-resourced Malaysians about their health, due to poor understanding, which can lead to premature death," she continues.

Thus, EMPOWERED was formed in 2009, and has since carried out outreach programmes reaching the homes of nearly 50,000 underprivileged Malaysians.

With a mission to save lives through early cancer detection and prevention programmes, EMPOWERED aims to provide a strong support network for under-resourced Malaysians who are diagnosed with pre-cancerous and cancerous conditions through their programmes across the country.



EMPOWERED specially trains its volunteers

MOBILISING THE MARGINALISED

While there are 11 NGOs and non-profits in Malaysia dedicated to cancer education, support and research, Ng mentions that none are directly targeted to the poor or aggressively involved in advocacy.

"Most of the cancer awareness programmes do not effectively penetrate low-income communities. Additionally, most residents in such communities require several jobs to make ends meet and do not have the time or resources to participate in health programmes conducted outside their homes.

"Our approach is personalised, always placing the community and its residents right in the centre of every activity we carry out. We ensure that our programmes, including the preparatory and implementation phases, are carried out within their communities. Bringing our best resources right to the doorsteps of the communities we serve is an effective way to ensure their participation in our life-saving campaigns," says Ng.

EMPOWERED provides an elaborate patient-support programme for patients in underprivileged communities who have been diagnosed with cancer. Volunteers are specially trained to provide one-to-one moral and



Dr Christina Ng (right), with Tan Sri Michelle Yeoh and Datuk Tracy Ong

FUND RAISING CHARITY DINNER

EMPOWERED recently held a charity dinner, 'Be an Angel with Tan Sri Michelle Yeoh' at Elegance Club Sdn. Bhd. in Kuala Lumpur. Yeoh pledged her personal support by donating an exquisite piece of Jacob & Co timepiece. She said, "Healthcare should always be made affordable to everyone in our society. I am really impressed by the admirable life-saving work EMPOWERED has done these past years in bringing awareness on cancer and conducting screening and treatment workshops for the underprivileged communities here in Malaysia. As Malaysians, we should work together to make our country a healthier and better place!"



Ng with the community leaders



Awareness workshop at Teratai Mewah



Another successful Colorectal Cancer Screening workshop

emotional support from the time the news is broken to the patient, or 'beneficiary', and throughout their entire medical journey until the completion of cancer therapy.

However, the road to success isn't always smooth, and Ng shares that among the challenges her organisation faces is the lack of resources and ironically, resistance from the residents themselves.

"In low-income communities, health is often a lesser priority due to pressing survival needs. As such, residents may not willingly participate in our campaigns. Community leaders need to be empowered to play vital roles in mobilising their residents into our programmes," Ng shares.

Since its inception in 2009, EMPOWERED has carried out outreach programmes in six large communities in Klang Valley, including its colorectal cancer screening and treatment programme in the last three years.

EMPOWERED has also been reaching out to cancer patients through the free distribution of cancer educational books in government and district hospitals, through its 'My Journal Book Campaign'.

Since 2011, 4,000 copies of *My Journal* have been allocated for free distribution. It contains information and worksheets to help survivors organise their treatment diary, keep doctor's appointments and monitor their medication.

"Our next project is scheduled to begin in January at Seri Sabah, Cheras. This project is expected to reach 15,000 low-income Malaysians. We have already started initial groundwork with the community leaders to plan for this colorectal cancer awareness, screening and treatment project," shares Ng. 🇲🇾