

MANAGEMENT OF FUNCTIONAL DECLINE IN OLDER ADULTS

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Singapore is facing a silver tsunami, so said our Health Minister, Mr Khaw Boon Wan in 2009. The proportion of Singapore residents (i.e. citizens and PRs) aged 65 and above has increased from 7.0% of the resident population in 1999 to 8.8% in 2009. We in the Family Medicine fraternity need to be prepared to manage this growing group of patients. One of the consequences of ageing is functional decline. The objective of this skill course is to improve the management of functional decline in older adults, and this has come just at the right time.

It often takes a lot more effort to maintain the same level of fitness as we get older. As clinicians, we need to know simple methods of assessing physical function and decline. Dr Wong Sweet Fun addresses this in her article on physical function, which also covers functional assessment, and the roles and responsibilities that primary care doctors can play.

Many of the senior members of our community also suffer from psychiatric and psychological disorders in their later years. Of these, depression remains the biggest problem, and we as primary care physicians need to be on the lookout for it. Better awareness, surveillance and management is needed to battle this debilitating illness, and Dr Ong Pui Sim's paper on "Mood" takes us step by step through the process of managing such patients.

Incontinence can be a significant problem in the older adult who suffers from this. The loss of continence is not only physically debilitating, it deals a psychological blow to the self-esteem, and is often suffered in silence. GPs would welcome a clear and simple guide, and Dr Terence Tang's unit 3 is just the ticket.

Many of us will have patients and relatives who are hard of hearing. The Hearing Handicap Inventory for the Elderly-Screening (HHIE-S) questionnaire is a useful tool for primary care providers to screen their older patients for hearing problems. A/Prof Lynne Lim's unit on hearing disorders in the elderly highlights this and gives a comprehensive overview, which is concise and clear.

Failing eyesight is something we all face with time. Presbyopia, glaucoma, macular degeneration, cataract, the list goes on. The 5th unit by Dr Au Eong Kay Guan and Ms Yulianti on vision gives a clear step-by-step guide on how to diagnose and manage visual impairment. The segment highlighting those red flag eye conditions that require emergency and urgent treatment will be of particular interest for us in Family Practice.

Oral health can impact the health and quality of life of the older adult. Poor oral health and chronic diseases are often interrelated. The need to help our elderly population maintain good oral health is emphasized in this unit by Dr Thean and Prof Yee.

This issue on management of functional decline addresses key health issues in the elderly. Primary care doctors would benefit from a deeper understanding of these issues and the timely intervention that they can initiate. It will better equip us to address the problems that the older adult is likely to face.

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