

First Citizens' Jury presents its recommendations on how to combat diabetes

Rachel Au-Yong

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If the Citizens' Jury had its way, there will be water coolers at hawker centres and higher Medisave claim limits for those managing chronic diseases.

These were part of the 12 recommendations from the inaugural Citizens' Jury, comprising 76 people from different walks of life tasked to come up with ideas on how to prevent and manage diabetes here.

On Saturday (Jan 13), after seven weeks of online discussion and three full-day meetings, the jury presented their report to Senior Minister of State for Health Amy Khor and other senior civil servants.

Unlike most government-moderated focus groups in Singapore, which are one-off sessions where the participants do not know if their ideas will be used, Dr Khor promised that her ministry will respond to the group's "unedited and unchanged" recommendations within three months.

Some recommendations were accepted on the spot.

Both Dr Khor and Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth permanent secretary Yeoh Chee Yan agreed that the jury's "Drink Plain Water" campaign would help stave cravings for sugary drinks, and they promised to install more water coolers at community clubs and cultural institutions.

The move to crowdsource ideas on tackling diabetes comes as Singapore is waging war on the chronic ailment, which affects one in nine adults here.

Diabetes is a major risk factor in heart attacks, stroke and blindness. It can also cause gangrene that may later require amputations, as well as kidney failure.

Dr Khor said the jurors also gave the Government "insights about some of the gaps in our policies". She later told reporters that the jury model - a form of "deliberative engagement" borrowed from countries like Australia - would be a useful way for the Government to work with citizens to "co-create and co-deliver solutions".

Among the jurors was retired business manager Christina Tan, 65, a diabetic and breast cancer survivor.

She joined the jury with the hope that its recommendations would eventually lead to the creation of a peer support group for newly diagnosed patients to help them manage their illness better. It was included in the report.

"There are a lot of resources worldwide, but Singapore has its own context, food culture and customs. I hope the recommendation will kick something off," she said.

Another participant was nutritionist Kalpana Bhaskaran, who is also vice-president of the Diabetes Society.

She said the experience helped her realise that "what we experts might think is common knowledge isn't necessarily the case." This in turn would shape the way her society carries out programmes and educational campaigns.

Dr Carol Soon, senior research fellow for the Institute of Policy Studies, which ran the jury alongside the Health Ministry, said the level of engagement is something worth noting.

"The promise of a response from the Government reinforces to the participants the value and significance of their contributions, so they know it's not just going to be another talkshop," she said.