

Cutting cancer treatment costs must be a national effort

Anselm Lee, a senior consultant at Singapore-based Parkway Cancer Centre, tells The Daily Star

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

BANGLADESH can bring down the cost of cancer treatment by way of initiating a national programme aimed at battling the disease, said a top physician.

Anselm Lee, senior consultant for paediatric haematology and oncology at Singapore-based Parkway Cancer Centre (PCC), a leading hospital in the region, said it would be very difficult to change anything at a personal level.

"Surgery and the use of facilities are all expensive in terms of paediatric treatment. Sometimes we need to use special machinery for the treatment of children that you don't usually use for adults."

One of the machines that the hospital uses for stem cell collection is especially made for children because of the small size of their bodies. "So these are all expensive investments that a healthcare facility has to bear."

But there is a way to bring down the cost of treatment, according to the expert.

"If we are to make it more affordable, it must be a national programme," he told The Daily Star in an interview in Dhaka last week.

Cancer is a deadly disease that not only affects the patients' lives but also their families. The silver lining is that constant advancements in medicine and medical technology can help the affected win the battle against the dis-

ease, he said.

"I can assure the patients that they can receive treatment that is as good as in any other developed country because we have the information and equipment needed to treat a patient. We can give them the most reliable treatment they can receive," said Lee.

PCC offers patients the most advanced and scientifically-proven treatments, he added.

Parkway's cancer treatment is available at the group's hospitals -- Gleneagles Hospital, Mount Elizabeth Hospital, Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, Mount Elizabeth Novena in Singapore, as well as at a specialised centre in the city state.

Lee, who graduated from the faculty of medicine, University of Hong Kong, in 1986, was in Dhaka to meet officials of the Parkway representative office in Dhaka and the doctors the hospital works with.

PCC is home to a comprehensive suite of cancer treatments, delivered by a highly skilled, multidisciplinary team of doctors, nurses, counsellors and other paramedical professionals.

"Every day, and for every patient, our team works hard to deliver holistic cancer care in a safe and soothing environment. They are aided by the latest technologies and proven innovative therapies to achieve optimal clinical outcomes," said Lee.

"We are able to generate an ecosystem where patients can



Anselm Lee

have a choice."

Lee acknowledges that cancer treatment is expensive, and the treatment is getting more and more expensive because of the continuous research and investment.

At Parkway, Lee is the only paediatric oncologist, and one of the six doctors with the same level of expertise.

He said a country's health system must look at the special needs involved with cancer

patients.

"By using resources to counter this at a national level, you can have facilities that can tend to a large number of children across the country. That would definitely help bring the cost down to a reasonable level that most individuals can afford."

He said cancer in children is very different from adults. In the clinical outcomes, children do much better than

adults, he added.

If children receive proper treatment, 75 percent of them survive into adulthood. "A country's healthcare system has to look at child cancer as a special need to conquer."

He said two of his previous patients, who he treated in the early 1990s, are now doctors.

"The hope is there. The first thing is you have to trust the treatment, doctors and hospitals. If not, no matter how good the treatment is, you can give up hope and die from the disease."

One decade ago, Parkway did not have any specialty in paediatric oncology, prompting it to go a long way to bring Lee from Hong Kong.

He began the cancer treatment programme at Parkway. "We made the programme viable. We want to make sure that children's lives are better."

About 200 new cases register with PCC every year. About a quarter of them will stay on to continue treatment in Singapore.

He said the treatment of cancer in Singapore is very expensive. "But patients can come for consultation, and will know what doctors at Parkway would do in individual case and can go back to their countries and have treatment as per their expectation."

The oncologists in the patients' home countries can contact him to know more details about the treatment procedure, he added.

California lawmakers, unions reach \$15 minimum wage deal

REUTERS, California

California lawmakers and union leaders have reached a tentative deal to raise the state's minimum wage to \$15 over six years that could avert a campaign to bring the issue to voters, two California newspapers reported on Sunday, citing unnamed sources.

The deal, if passed in the state legislature and signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown, would add to a wave of minimum wage increases at the state level in the United States, where the federal minimum wage has remained at \$7.25 an hour for more than six years.

The agreement, as reported by the Los Angeles Times and the Sacramento Bee, would gradually raise the minimum wage in the most populous U.S. state from the current \$10 to \$15 in 2022. Businesses with fewer than 25 employees would have one extra year to comply with the proposed law.

The Bee said Brown is part of the agreement, while the Times said the Democratic governor could make a formal announcement on a deal as early as Monday.

A spokesman for Brown was unavailable for comment on Sunday. Sources told the Times that lawmakers could vote on the proposed agreement by the end of next week by amending an existing wage-hike bill.

To pass in the legislature, any minimum wage hike would have to win the approval of moderate Democrats, who in the past have blocked key legislation backed by the governor and the majority party's more liberal leaders.

Raising the minimum wage to fight income inequality has cropped up on many Democratic candidates' agendas ahead of the November presidential, congressional and state elections.

But the idea has drawn fierce opposition from conservatives and some business groups, who have said a higher minimum would harm small businesses and strain the budgets of government agencies forced to pay more to workers.

"Let's start by calling this irresponsible," said Michael Saltsman, research director at the Employment Policies Institute, a fiscally conservative think-tank that has argued against minimum wage hikes.

"When you talk about these really massive jumps it's no longer an impact at the margin, it's the sort of thing that could be the difference between a business staying open and closing," he added.

In 2013, Brown signed into law a measure that gradually increased the minimum wage from \$8 to \$10 an hour in 2016. But he said earlier this year that any future increase has to be done "very carefully" and over time.

Brazil debates economic cost of corruption investigation



Balloons depicting Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as prisoners are sold during a protest in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

BRAZIL'S former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is raising hackles after warning that the mega Petrobras corruption probe is paralyzing essential sectors of the Brazilian economy, like oil and construction.

Many saw Lula's comments as a cynical attempt to deflect public attention from a two-year-old investigation, now that he has been implicated in the widening corruption scandal.

But the issue he touched on, invoking the IMF as an authority, is at the center of a growing debate among analysts and economists.

At a meeting with union organizers in Sao Paulo on Wednesday, the former machinist said the probe was necessary but asked "whether it's not possible to combat corruption without closing companies... and without causing unemployment."

According to the IMF, he said, a 2.5 percentage point contraction in Brazil's economy was attributable "to the panic created in Brazilian society."

"When this is all over, there could be a lot of people in jail, but there could also be millions of unemployed," he said.

The IMF in January projected that the Brazilian economy would shrink by 3.5 percent this year, 2.5 percentage points more than its previous estimate. In 2015, the Brazilian economy sank 3.8 percent.

According to GO Associados consultancy, the corruption probe has reduced

Brazil's GDP by about 3.6 percentage points, taking into account direct and indirect effects as well as the incomes of hundreds of thousands of employees.

Unemployment, meanwhile, has continued to climb, rising to 8.2 percent in February compared to 5.8 percent a year earlier.

Maurice Obstfeld, the IMF's chief economist, attributed the worsening outlook to the "political configuration" of Brazil, with the "initiation of impeachment proceedings (against current President Dilma Rousseff) and the increasing scope of corruption allegations."

These factors, he said, "have undermined confidence, as has the continued deterioration of the fiscal outlook."

Reaction to Lula's statements has been swift.

Antonio Cesar Bochenek, the president of the Association of Federal Judges of Brazil, said the corruption probe "has done no damage... and has allowed for the recovery of three billion reais (\$800 million), as well as goods and property."

"Impunity increases corruption and corruption causes disastrous damage to the economy," Bochenek told newspaper O Estado de Sao Paulo.

For Jose Robalinho Cavalcanti, president of the National Association of Attorneys of the Republic, "Lula does himself a disfavor with such declarations because... he was in charge of running the country and knows very well that the economic situation is formed much more by economic policy than any investigation."

Kuwaitis face cuts in lavish benefits as oil prices drop

BBC NEWS, Kuwait City

KUWAIT needs to make budget cuts to cope with declining revenues due to lower oil prices

Sitting on the world's sixth largest proven oil reserves, Kuwait's 1.3m citizens are accustomed to lavish benefits, such as interest-free housing loans, free education and healthcare, and food and fuel subsidies.

But like other Gulf states, the sharp fall in global oil prices has forced the country to consider whether these benefits are luxuries it can no longer afford.

Last month, Parliament Speaker Marzouq al-Ghanim warned that continuing to spend in the same way would be "economic suicide".

"We cannot lie to the Kuwaiti people, we cannot come here and say we will protect your pockets and the citizen will not be affected," he said. "Everyone's pockets will be affected... This is the reality."

In January, the Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Sabah spoke of the need for better management of spending and for budget cuts to cope with declining revenues

However, an attempt by the government to remove subsidies on diesel and kerosene last year was heavily criticised by MPs.

Acting Finance Minister Anas al-Saleh hopes the corporation tax will help cut Kuwait's deficit

The pressure led to the subsidies being restored, although it was decided that they would be reviewed monthly in accordance with global price fluctuations.

The acting Finance Minister, Anas al-Saleh, also announced this month that the cabinet had approved a plan to impose a 10% tax on corporate profits, as one of a number of measures aimed at reducing Kuwait's budget deficit, projected to be 8.18bn dinars (\$27.1bn; £19.2bn) for this financial year.

In addition, some state-owned projects, including airports, ports and some facilities of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC), would be privatised, Saleh said.



Kuwaiti MPs want the government to crack down on medical tourism.

Kuwaiti lawyer Mishari al-Sawwagh feels that the government's priorities in implementing such measures are misplaced.

"Our problem in Kuwait is not about money... it's about leadership and management," he told the BBC. Sawwagh believes cutting subsidies will not only hit Kuwaiti citizens but also the 2.9 million-strong foreign workforce on which they depend.

"Lifting petrol subsidies, for example, will affect foreign workers who may consider leaving as they can no longer afford the living costs here, and this will also affect our economy," he said.

One area of public spending that has come under scrutiny is healthcare. At present, thousands of Kuwaitis are sent each year to the US, Europe and elsewhere for medical treatment.

However, many say the system has been abused by people claiming to be suffering from medical conditions in order to spend months abroad at the state's expense.

In 2014, the government spent 441m dinars (\$1.46bn; £1.04bn) on funding some 11,000 medical trips abroad, according to figures from the State Audit Bureau.

To reduce the numbers of so-

called "medical tourists", the government announced plans to reduce the daily allowances given to patients and their companions.

Kuwaiti MPs attend a session at the National Assembly on 1 March 2016 in Kuwait City.

Kuwaiti MPs want the government to crack down on medical tourism. But MPs have called on the government to review its decision and instead focus on ensuring that only those in need of specialist treatment are sent abroad.

Ahmed Baqer al-Ali, a Kuwaiti doctor doing postgraduate training in plastic surgery in London, believes the popularity of medical tourism is a result of a number of problems with Kuwait's healthcare system.

"A lot of patients do not trust the health system," he told the BBC. "We find people travelling for treatment for chronic conditions such as diabetes and back pain, which can be successfully treated in Kuwait."

"The government should take tough steps to resolve this issue. But it's not just about reducing the amount - it's about the whole concept."

In addition to improved assessment of those seeking treatment abroad, Dr Ali believes that

money needs to be spent on building world-class medical institutions in Kuwait.

He points out that this is already happening in the UAE, with Abu Dhabi opening branches of the Cleveland Clinic and King's College Hospital, while Dubai attracted an estimated 500,000 medical tourists in 2015.

Dr Ali says this kind of long-term vision would not only improve the healthcare available to Kuwait's population, but also provide much-needed training positions for local doctors, whose development is being hindered by the practice of exporting patients.

Most Kuwaitis diagnosed with cancer are currently treated abroad, for example.

"This is a disaster because we have plenty of local oncologists who have been trained abroad, and many in the new generation of doctors want to specialise in oncology, but they have no exposure to cases," Dr Ali said.

"It's not about the quality of doctors here; we are trained at the best centres in the world."

"The problems are management issues and the lack of infrastructure. There's no quick solution, but this is what the government needs to solve."