

Food for thought

Nutrition Society of Malaysia president **Dr Tee E Siong** on the possibilities, setbacks and challenges Malaysians face in eating right

by **Wong Ee Laine**

The subject of nutrition is revisited every once in a while by the mass media, bringing to light the worsening health of Malaysians in general. Most recently, when the Malaysian government mulled over whether to withdraw the sugar subsidy, one man thought we were barking up the wrong tree, and he has good reasons for thinking so.

As the president of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), Dr Tee E Siong strives to educate the public on all things edible in his aim to create a healthier nation. Speaking to *Health & Beauty*, Dr Tee highlights why we're not eating correctly and challenges the NSM faces. (He even reveals his penchant for all things sweet.)

THERE'S BEEN MUCH ADO ABOUT THE EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION OF SUGAR IN MALAYSIA. WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS?

I don't know why people are so overly worried about sugar as one particular item. Yes, too much sugar is bad, but we should not talk about sugar exclusively. We should be talking about eating in general. Sugar doesn't cause diabetes. Excess calories, ie obesity, causes diabetes. Sugar is only a contributing factor because it contributes to calorie intake. Having said that, I don't mean to say that people should continue taking too much sugar. I just don't want people to bark up the wrong tree.

DO YOU FORESEE MALAYSIANS CHANGING OUR DIETARY HABITS?

I've been practising nutrition for 35 years and I find that people's habits are not improving despite our efforts to inform and

educate. However, I believe that people can change food habits. Another message to send across is that Malaysian fast food can be as unhealthy as Western fast food due to the high content of coconut milk, sugar and salt. But within our local cuisine, there are also healthy options. Do everything in moderation.

ARE MALAYSIANS MORE AWARE OF NUTRITION AND HEALTHY EATING?

Yes. This is due in part to the Internet. But I have a feeling they're not putting it into practice. I also think we need to continue to do more. We must inculcate healthy eating with the younger age group, not when they're 30. Our schools are not doing enough. We have it in the curriculum, yes. But is it being practiced? We have to be consistent with our programmes also. We can't just have launches and leave it as that after that.

THERE HASN'T BEEN A PERIODIC NATIONAL FOOD CONSUMPTION SURVEY SINCE 2003. WHY DO YOU THINK THERE'S SUCH A LACK OF STUDIES OR DATA COLLECTION IN THE COUNTRY?

I don't know. Many countries, even developing nations like the Philippines, have up-to-date data collection. I suppose someone doesn't see the value in putting money into that sort of research. But it's basic data a country needs so we know where to put our programmes. Nutrition surveys will tell us changes in trends, in weight and height, in consumption patterns. We do have a health and morbidity survey—the last one was in

2006. We are making progress but we need a survey on nutrition.

WHAT ARE SOME IMPROVEMENTS THE NSM HOPES TO SEE IN 2010?

I want to see more collaboration with various government agencies. We work quite closely with the Ministry of Health, but we would like to work more with the Ministry of Education. We need to reach out to school children. We hope that the Ministry of Women, Family and Community and Development as well as corporate members, will continue to support us. In addition, for our publication, we will focus on nutrition for primary school children in 2010 and in 2011, we will focus on secondary school children.

WHAT IS YOUR WISH LIST FOR 2010?

My wish list is for Malaysians to know their body weight and height, blood pressure, body mass index and cholesterol. With that in mind, hopefully they will be more conscious about everything else such as their diet.

WHAT IS YOUR TYPICAL DAILY DIET AND WHAT IS YOUR WEAKNESS?

For breakfast, I have cereal or muesli with full-cream milk and an egg every day. For lunch, I have something light like soup noodles or porridge. My dinner is a little heavier. I have vegetables, meat, although I try to have more fish than meat. I try to practise what I preach which is to eat everything in moderation. Just like everyone else, I like sweet foods, chocolates, but I try not to take too much of it. **H&B**



Dr Tee E Siong