

Promoting Health and Sustainability by Advocating Plant Based Diet during COVID-19 Pandemic

Buddhist Tzu-Chi Dialysis Centres

GGHH Agenda Goals

- Leadership
- Food

Organizational Goal

- To be a model in promoting health and sustainability by encouraging patients and their family to adopt a plant-based diet by providing nutritious, environmentally friendly, and ethically thoughtful meal boxes
- To reduce ecological footprint of the organization and improve the health of staff, patients & volunteers during COVID-19 pandemic

Progress Achieved

- The Buddhist Tzu-Chi Dialysis Centre started to provide vegetarian meals to their patients, patient’s families, nurses and staff after the “Movement Control Order” (MCO) was implemented in Malaysia to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.
- On the first day (March 19, 2020), Dialysis Centre at Penang Branch distributed 125 meal boxes with that number over the following days. In April, there were an average of around 400 boxes given out per day at the three Buddhist Tzu-Chi dialysis centers (See Annex A for data).

Promoting of Ethical Eating day in January - 2020



The Issue

The first COVID-19 case in Malaysia appeared in January 2020 and by mid-March, the virus had spread to every state and federal territory in the country. A nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented starting March 18, 2020 and extended until June 9, 2020. During the MCO period, Buddhist Tzu Chi Dialysis Centre have to take precautionary and preventive measures to ensure the well-being of the patients, staff, and volunteers including provision of meals to minimize movement and reduce risk of exposure and contacts. The volunteers prepared vegetarian meals to strengthen our advocacy on using plant-based diet, and promote health and sustainability. It was also meant to contribute towards preventing future risk of contracting zoonotic diseases.

Sustainability Strategy Implemented

The Buddhist Tzu Chi Organization has been promoting vegetarianism for years. Since establishment of the Dialysis Centre in 1997, it implemented the “Vegetarian Food Only” policy and only meatless/plant based food are allowed into the building. The organization actively promoted the campaign for vegetarianism in 2003 during the SARS outbreak in Asia. The aim is to raise awareness on the benefits of vegetarianism, such as mitigating global warming through reduction in greenhouse gases emitted by the livestock industry, improvement in human health and nurturing people’s compassion towards animals.

The response to COVID-19 pandemic and the MCO implemented by Malaysian Government aimed to promote health and sustainability through provision of vegetarian meals to not only our staff but also extending it to our patients and the patients’ families. This eases the financial burden for the under privileged patients and also reduces their contact with public. The meal boxes are packed in reusable food container thus, also reducing waste from food packaging.

On the average, a Malaysian adult chicken meat consumption is 40.85kg per year¹. Each day a person consumes 0.112kg of chicken that is about 0.037kg every meal. Every 100 gram of chicken is equal to 18.4g of protein. On the other hand, 100 gram of tofu is equivalent to 10.9g of protein. Each kilogram of chicken produces 6.9kg of CO₂ and each kilogram of Tofu produces 2.0kg of CO₂. That is, every chicken meal is equivalent to 0.26kg CO₂ while a tofu meal with same protein requirement as a chicken meal is equivalent only to 0.12 kg CO₂. Thus, by consuming vegetarian meals, there is a substantial reduction in carbon emission.

Implementation process

The CEO Team together with Tzu Chi volunteers started the project of providing vegetarian meal boxes to staff, patients and patients’ families on March 19, 2020, the day after MCO was implemented. All staff and patients were informed and briefed about the meal boxes and the reasons why the organization is doing it during MCO. (To date as 24th July, this project is still on-going)

¹ <https://www.hospitalesporlasaludambiental.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Waste-and-Food-Vegetarianism-and-Utilization-of-Reusable-Food-Containers-Reduces-Carbon-Emissions-Malaysia.pdf>

Every day except for Sundays during MCO, vegetarian meals in reusable boxes are being distributed for lunch and dinner. Starting March, the distribution took place in their two branches: Penang Dialysis Center (PGDC) and Butterworth Dialysis Center (BWDC). Volunteers from Penang prepare the food for both PGDC and BWDC. On April, the Kedah Dialysis Center (KDC) branch also started distributing vegetarian meals prepared by a dialysis patient together with their local volunteers.



Tracking Progress

The daily numbers of vegetarian meal boxes given out were well recorded (See Annex A). During the MCO, a daily virtual meeting among all staff of the Dialysis Centers was encouraged to share their experiences in implementing the project. We have more and more staff, patients and their family members pledging to be vegetarians. More employees are now observing vegetarianism.

A survey on “Meatless Campaign/plant based diet” for the staff was also done on the first week of MCO. From the 80% of staff that responded, 70% were already vegetarians and 15.2% had changed from vegetarian diet to vegan diet (See Annex B). The non-vegetarian had pledged to reduce meat intake as well.

Challenges and lessons learned

There are patients and family members who did not like vegetarian meals that the Center provided, and we kept explaining that more than half of the infectious diseases that affect people are zoonotic diseases, which come from animals. During Covid-19 pandemic, we actively explained how the virus spread and how we can mitigate infections through plant based diet. Through perseverance, continuous education and support, we managed to get more patients and family members to take plant-based diet, reduce the usage of food packaging by using the reusable food container, and reduce food wastage.

Next Steps

In the past, vegetarian meals were usually observed as a result of religious commitments. However, more and more people nowadays switch to vegetarian meals primarily for environmental protection, humanitarian factors, health reasons and as an effective mitigation of zoonotic disease. Promoting vegetarianism is part of the organization’s mission and will continue to be the model and promote health and sustainability through food choices. Ethical eating will not only reduce environmental footprint and improving health, but it will also educate people to be more compassionate towards animals and Mother Earth. During this pandemic, we also have a team of volunteers preparing vegetarian meals for the front

liners at the government hospital on Mondays to Fridays. In our daily staff meeting, we are encouraging and promoting plant-based diet. Such will be an on-going activity and promotion.

Demographic information

Buddhist Tzu Chi Dialysis Centres are providing free dialysis treatment, EPO injection, blood tests and regular specialist checkup for all patients irrespective of race, religion or creed. Presently we have 3 Tzu-Chi Dialysis centres in Malaysia, Penang (PGDC), and Butterworth (BWDC) and in Alor Star (KDC).

As at July, 2020,

- PGDC has Hemodialysis machines, a total of 140 patients and 34 nursing staff
- BWDC has Hemodialysis machines, a total of 100 patients and 21 nursing staff
- KDC has Hemodialysis machines, a total of 90 patients and 21 nursing staff

Buddhist Tzu Chi Dialysis Centre also provides free essential screening under the CKD awareness and prevention program and free consultation clinic.

Links

<https://www.facebook.com/DaAi.Channel.Malaysia/videos/576359746294899/>

https://www.facebook.com/DaAi.Channel.Malaysia/videos/259975682074045/?__so__=permalink&__r__v__=related_videos

Main contact person information:

Teoh Bee Ling

Email: pgdc.nurse.beeling@gmail.com

Telephone n°: 6012-4043886

Quotes:

Jing Si Aphorism by Master Cheng Yen: “Vegetarianism means disciplining ourselves, cherishing our own lives and respecting all living beings”.

Vegetarianism cultivates patience, compassion and wisdom.

Publication Date: 10 August 2020