Women face risk of heart disease too

BY ROYSTON SIM

IT IS often seen as an illness for middle-aged men but women are also at risk of heart disease, a symposium was told yesterday.

Madam Chong Yoke Lim spoke of how she woke up at 5.45am and found herself struggling to breathe.

The 66-year-old retired teacher thought she was having an asthma attack, but her medication did not work and her frantic daughter called for an ambulance.

Madam Chong said at the Go Red For Women symposium: “I couldn’t breathe, and the last thing I knew was that the paramedics came. They later said my condition was critical, that my windpipe was closing.”

She had suffered from a heart attack, something no one else in her family had experienced before. Although she had been plagued by nagging chest pains for a few months before the attack on Jan 21, doctors told her it was just heart burn.

Madam Rosiah Haron told of how she felt an ache in her back in 2009. She later vomited and felt a pain in her jaw that spread to her elbow.

Yet, the 56-year-old, who was a cardiac nurse for 32 years, did not think it was a heart attack. She realised how severe her condition was only when she went to a polyclinic for an electrocardiogram that day. “If my patients or family had those symptoms, I would have called for an ambulance immediately.”

Their cases illustrate the risk women face from heart disease and stroke, which accounted for 31.4 per cent of deaths among women here in 2010. The symposium at National University Hospital sought to raise awareness among women about heart disease and ways to prevent it.

Speaking at the event, Minister of State for Health Amy Khor noted that heart disease and stroke together kill five times as many women compared to breast cancer. She said: “Mention heart disease and people imagine an older man with a slight pot belly, holding a cigarette, puffing away, but the fact that heart disease affects women just as profoundly has been underemphasised.”

She noted that while men are at greater risk of heart disease earlier in life, women’s risk increases after menopause when their oestrogen levels, which protect against such diseases, fall.

A nationwide study on how acute coronary syndrome differs by gender among Asians found women have it more severely and are twice as likely to die as men. The study analysed records of 15,151 patients admitted with acute coronary syndrome to public institutions here between 2000 and 2005. About 28 per cent of them were women.

Presenting the findings at the symposium, Associate Professor Carolyn Lam noted that the women admitted were also 10 years older on average compared to the men admitted.

She said: “Women need to recognise that they are at risk of heart attacks too... Early detection and treatment will hopefully lead to better outcomes in women.”