Intellectually disabled ‘more disease-prone’

Health study shows these adults are more susceptible to chronic diseases

By DEBBIE LEE

A STUDY on the health of adults with intellectual disabilities in Singapore has thrown up some worrying trends.

Findings obtained by the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (Minds) show that these adults are more prone to hypertension and other chronic diseases compared with the general population.

They also tend to exercise less, and stay away from health screenings.

Conducted between July 2011 and November 2011, the study examined 227 intellectually disabled adults who were clients of Minds. Participants were aged 40 and above, with a median age of 46 years.

The findings were published in December last year in the Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, and were discussed by its authors in a panel discussion at Minds yesterday afternoon.

The study found that intellectually disabled adults had a 22.5 per cent chance of developing hypertension, and a 34.8 per cent chance of suffering from dyslipidaemia, or high cholesterol.

This is higher than the national average for the general population – 16.7 per cent for hypertension and 18 per cent for dyslipidaemia.

One of the study’s authors, Professor Gerald Koh from NUS, said the high prevalence of obesity among the study’s participants was a risk factor for chronic diseases.

Of the 80.6 per cent in the study who had their body mass index measured, 54.1 per cent of them were overweight.

The problem is compounded by a lack of exercise among intellectually disabled adults, said Prof Koh. Only 9.4 per cent of the study’s participants exercise regularly.

“It may not be safe for an intellectually disabled person to exercise by himself or herself,” said Prof Koh.

He noted that elderly caregivers, in particular, may need more support to help their charges get active.

Prof Koh also called for more affordable health screenings for the intellectually disabled and for more support to be given to them during such screenings.

Anecdotal evidence in the study suggested that caregivers tend to feel that health screenings are unnecessary. Some were also concerned that their charges would experience discomfort.

Madam Christina Steven Singh, 67, whose daughter Victoria, 32, has Down syndrome, used to feel this way.

She said her daughter would “freak out” and refuse to sit still during dental check-ups, but is now more at ease when accompanied by Minds training officers.