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Fighting the Dengue Menace: Time for the “Kampung Spirit”

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Synopsis

As the number of dengue cases in Singapore rises to dangerous levels, there is urgent need to sustain community involvement to tackle the problem. Such initiatives however should adapt to the current lifestyles of the population to achieve greater effectiveness.

Commentary

THE NUMBER of dengue cases in Singapore has crossed 10,000 since January 2013, with two recent deaths. Many experts expect the number to continue rising, making it a matter of urgency for communities to be informed and involved in tackling the problem. This is a necessary step as transmission is spread through the Aedes mosquito with the majority of breeding spots found in homes and litter thrown in public places.

While the authorities have swung into action, there is a need for greater cooperation between all parties and a heavy dose of the *kampung spirit* to ensure that communities take an interest in their surroundings, keeping their homes and other public places clean and free of breeding sites.

Defining the kampung spirit

A national anti-dengue campaign was launched by the Prime Minister in April this year. The National Environment Agency (NEA) is conducting checks for breeding sites. Grassroots groups are distributing materials and demonstrating preventative methods in their neighbourhoods.

However today's urban communities have busy lifestyles and many people may not have the time or the inclination to engage in initiatives to fight the menace. To extend the outreach and encourage greater involvement, there is a need to adapt the understanding and practice of the *kampung spirit* to current lifestyles.

The word *kampung* means village in the Malay language, a social structure that is no longer found in an urban city-state such as Singapore. In this respect, the term *kampung spirit* denotes the relationships and interactions of a community at a time when people still lived in villages. The term metaphorically describes the easy familiarity of a group of people with the neighbours they live alongside, referring to the proactive, spontaneous action of community members in assisting each other.

More importantly, it underscores the willingness to take ownership of the surrounding environment and the well-

being of the community. It is this spirit of care and cooperation that is needed to ensure everyone pitches in and do their part in managing the dengue outbreak.

Efforts are already ongoing to get neighbourhoods involved in anti-dengue initiatives, especially those that have been identified as dengue clusters. To better promote community involvement, the People's Association grassroots volunteers are visiting homes and looking for mosquito breeding sites in their neighbourhoods.

Communities of interactions

Apart from engaging "communities of place", another possible means of outreach may be to target "communities of interactions". This takes into account current social conditions in Singapore, where people lead busy, urban lifestyles, and are caught up in priorities of work, family and personal interests. There is also less permanence in today's communities. People have become increasingly mobile and with a fifth of the population being immigrants, one may have even less familiarity with a neighbour than previously.

Hence, the familiarity once represented by *the kampung* may be more pronounced in workplaces, schools, gyms, shops and other social organisations. Many have as much, if not more, interactions with their work colleagues, their children's school teachers, the local supermarket or gym than they do with their neighbours. Hence, these "communities of interactions" may prove to be an effective means of expanding outreach and community involvement, complementing efforts already in place to involve those that are living in the area itself.

The North West Community Development Council's (CDC) recent initiative provides a good example. In stepping up its anti-dengue awareness campaign during the June school holidays, the North West CDC worked with travel agencies, schools and grassroots organisations to spread information on ways in which homeowners travelling abroad can take steps to eliminate possible breeding sites in their homes. The travel agencies will distribute information to those who sign up with their tour packages.

Adapting the kampung spirit

Schools in the area are also tasked with sending out reminders to students who may be travelling with their parents. This is an interesting means of spreading the message with current lifestyle choices and interactions in mind. Many Singaporean parents travel abroad with their children during the June school holidays. The approach takes advantage of the interactions between families and the travel agencies as well as schools and specifically links the need to take preventive steps as part of travel and holiday plans.

This approach can be further extended. For example, local florists and garden landscaping firms can be roped in to remind their customers to keep gardens and potted plants clean and clear of breeding sites. Cleaners and domestic helpers are another important resource. Cleaning companies and agencies that train domestic helpers can be tasked with providing the appropriate training to cleaners and domestic helpers to specifically look out for breeding sites and to spread the message to those that they work with.

Companies that run corporate social responsibility programmes can be encouraged to seek out opportunities to take part in anti-dengue initiatives. This can involve working individuals, potentially bringing the message across to work spaces and the surrounding public areas.

Adapting the *kampung spirit* to reflect current lifestyles and social interactions may be a way to galvanise community efforts to curb the dengue outbreak. By taking account of the interactions and relationships that are prevalent in current living conditions, more people can be reached and encouraged to take steps that would prevent mosquito breeding sites.

It may just be that the *kampung spirit* is present within the population, but needs to be evoked and redirected through different channels that fit present-day realities.

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