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Ageism, poor health are major barriers to seniors working longer: Experts

Very few countries in the world are well placed to seize the opportunities that come with longer lifespans of their population.

Among the biggest barriers are ageism and lack of good health, which block the continued participation of older people in the workforce.

While people are living longer, they continue to retire around the same age. This has to change if the full benefits of longer lifespans are to be reaped.

This was the consensus among several speakers at the first summit based on the United States' National Academy of Medicine's (NAM) Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity, which was published in June following almost three years of work by an international committee of experts.

The meeting, held at the National University Health System Tower block in Kent Ridge, drew

close to 600 delegates from 12 countries, some of whom joined virtually. A second summit is scheduled in the US later this year.

Dr Victor Dzau, president of NAM, said that if countries do not make changes to seize the opportunities that come with longer lives, they could face higher fiscal burdens, lower gross domestic product, and have more people living with poor health and being dependent on others.

The report essentially said it is good for people who live longer to stay in the workforce longer. In order to do this, they should not just live longer lives, but also need to remain healthy for more years. And for that to happen, there needs to be social, environmental and infrastructural changes that support this.

Professor John Eu-Li Wong, senior vice-president of health innovation and translation at the Na-



A mock-up of Singapore's first assisted-living HDB flats for seniors planned in Bukit Batok, in December 2020. Studies have shown that providing housing and support for seniors reduces emergency department visits and hospital stays, "and can generate a return on investment of US\$1.57 (\$\$2.18) in savings for every US\$1 spent", said an expert. ST FILE PHOTO

tional University of Singapore, who co-chaired the report, said 24 per cent of deaths and diseases can be linked to environmental hazards.

He gave the example of good housing, which is affordable and safe, with no-step entry, wide doors, and switches and outlets at

easily reachable heights.

Prof Wong said studies have shown that "providing housing and support reduces emergency department visits and hospital stays, and can generate a return on investment of US\$1.57 (\$\$2.18) in savings for every US\$1 spent".

Professor Linda Fried from Co-

lumbia University, who co-chaired the report with Prof Wong, said designing for older adults often results in better design for all ages.

And money spent on keeping them healthy reaps huge rewards. "Delaying the onset of chronic conditions by one year is estimated to be worth US\$37 trillion in the US

alone," she said.

Prof Fried also said it is a fallacy that having more older people in the workforce takes opportunities away from younger adults.

In fact, the opposite is true as the presence of more older people in the workforce has a positive correlation with the number of younger people working, and age diversity in the workplace has been shown to improve team performance.

Professor Zhao Yaohui from the China Centre for Economic Research at Peking University pointed out that "healthy longevity enables older people to contribute to societies, but to reap the longevity dividend, societies must enable older people to be productive". But this is not happening in most countries.

She also touched on the importance of lifelong education and re-training, which will allow older people to acquire the skills that will keep them in the workforce.

Professor Hiroki Nakatani from Keio University, who spoke virtually at the meeting, said the sharp decline in the working population in Japan is a big headache. He suggested this can be solved by changing the definition of senior citizens from 65 years to 75 years – to great applause from the audience.

Salma Khalik