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Making society more diabetes friendly

By Ihab Shaanawy

WITH a look of horror and tears in her eyes the 33-year housewife, Sommaya, received the news from her doctor that she had just joined 7.5 million diabetic Egyptians.

She spent a night in despair, thinking of all the sad stories of friends and relatives with this disease, which, according to the latest Health Ministry statistics has attacked 17 per cent of Egyptians and is blamed for a large number of kidney and vascular diseases that are responsible for more than 70 per cent of deaths in the country. "My life is shattered. I have lost all my dreams and hopes, and I am depressed and unable to do my job," said the new patient whose knowledge of the effects of the disease filled her mind.

Her doctor gave her no reason for her disease. He prescribed her a pile of medicine and gave her a long list of instructions, which after a while she found impossible to follow.



"This country is very unfriendly for diabetics. It lacks training facilities and has a cuisine that is full of sweets, carbohydrates and heavy meals," said Hayat Tawfik, a 63-year-old housewife, who has lived with diabetes for 20 years.

"My doctor used to warn me against those kinds of foods and advised me to do

sports," said the granny who laughed as she imagined herself running in streets of Ain Shams where she lives.

According to doctors, diabetes is a chronic disease that cannot be cured. It can only be controlled with medicines, a healthy diet and constant exercise.

"Most Egyptian patients find it difficult

to change their lifestyle after learning about their disease. Some of them try hard. Others pay for their negligence," said a young doctor in a diabetes clinic.

He said that most of his patients only concentrate on medication and dream of a drug to cure their illness without following a certain lifestyle.

But for Mahmoud, one of the patients, there are other problems concerning the doctors too. "They don't realise how difficult it is to carry out their instructions. They only give lists of foods and things to do without giving an ear to the individual circumstances of their patients," he said.

Mahmoud had to spend long hours away from home and had never found a restaurant that provided the food on his doctor's list.

He also complained about companies whose profits thrive, "while we still only take old fashioned medicines."

During a recent seminar held to mark World Diabetes Day, the Egyptian Ministry of Health published a new guide for all clinics in Egypt with up-to-date research in this field.

During the seminar doctors and researchers highlighted the need to spread awareness about diabetes and

encourage early diagnosis of the illness.

World Diabetes Day is observed on November 14 in honour of Frederick Banting, who, with Charles Best, discovered insulin in 1922. The World Health Organisation estimates that 387 million people worldwide have diabetes. This number is likely to more than double by 2040 with middle and low-income countries being the worst affected.

Diabetes mellitus is linked to the obesity and is caused when the body does not produce enough insulin or when the cells are unable to use it. This raises blood sugar levels beyond control. Failure to control blood sugar levels leads to many complications including heart disease, blindness, nerve and kidney damage.

With diabetes cases set to boom worldwide, the focus is to spread awareness of the disease so that consumers and health care systems can cope with it. The theme of this year's World

Diabetes Day is Diabetes Education and Prevention.

Diabetes is not a new disease for Egyptians. It was first documented here in 1550BC. Back then diabetes, or what the historians believe was diabetes, was described as a rare disease. An Egyptian manuscript mentions "the passing of too much urine", which historians take as the first reference to diabetes.

The disease in Egypt today far from being rare, poses a great danger to large numbers of people and will have a bigger social and economic cost if Egypt does not produce a national plan to make the country more diabetes friendly and spread awareness that may slow the diabetes rate.