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HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD RAISES AN ARMY OF 10,000 HEALTH AMBASSADORS

Along with an artillery of programmes and initiatives to boost health literacy, establish health-promoting ecosystems across the island, customise neighbourhood health facilities and track the calories in your fried carrot cake

To encourage Singapore residents to embrace healthy lifestyle habits and integrate these habits in their daily lives, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) is initiating a sweeping social movement by tapping on something as simple as the personal networks of ordinary people from all walks of life.

2 Launched at this year's National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign (NHLC), which kicked off today at the Sengkang Community Club by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, this initiative will see HPB roping in about 10,000 advocates of healthy living by 2015, as part of its new Health Ambassador Network.

3 Made up of youths, young adults, parents and seniors, these ambassadors will be trained and equipped with knowledge on how to live healthily. Using a peer mentoring approach, they will then share healthy lifestyle tips with their family, friends, peers, neighbours and colleagues.

4 The Health Ambassador Network will also serve as a proactive feedback channel to gather valuable public insights on a broad spectrum of health-related issues, including health policies and programmes.

5 Currently, there are already 1,000 such ambassadors, who have participated in HPB initiatives such as Integrated Screening @ Whampoa, Walk for Dementia, 'I Quit', 'Lose to Win'[®], the National Brisk Walking Programme and the Senior Health Ambassador Programme.

6 Over the next three years, this support network of Health Ambassadors will be integral to HPB's vision of co-planning, co-creating and co-implementing with Singapore residents, health-promoting communities across the island. This is aligned with the overall theme of NHLC 2011, which focuses on empowering everyone, from children to the elderly, to set healthy examples and encourage each other to stay healthy together.

7 "Any behavioural change is difficult, but studies have shown that we are often influenced by the people we interact with. By mobilising an army of Health Ambassadors, we aim to harness the power of peer influence to spark a health-promoting social movement that cuts across all demographics," said Mr Ang Hak Seng, Chief Executive Officer, HPB. "HPB's aim is to have at least one health champion in every household."

8 A newly-appointed Health Ambassador who has been organising health screenings and sharing healthy lifestyle tips with other Singapore residents living around Sengkang Community Club for about five years, Madam Samantha Wong, BBM, agreed that the power of peer influence can bring about positive social change. "I have seen how effective my friends and neighbours have been when they encourage the ones they love and care about to eat healthily and stay physically active," she said.

Raising health literacy in Singapore

9 While the Health Ambassador Network will be instrumental in driving the uptake of a healthier lifestyle for all, HPB will also look into new ways to boost knowledge and understanding of health topics and lifestyle behaviour.

10 To raise greater awareness of health-related issues, HPB has developed an action plan to improve health literacy, defined by HPB as "the degree to which people have the ability to obtain, understand, assess and communicate health information and services needed to make healthier decisions". These decisions occur at home, at work, in school, in the healthcare system and in society as a whole.

11 "Health literacy is not health education," said Mr Ang. "Health literacy is a relatively new area of knowledge and research in Singapore as well as in many parts of the world, despite its important ramifications for health promotion and disease prevention. In Singapore, 96 per cent of its population aged 15 and above are literate, but this does not mean Singapore residents are health-literate and understand how to take proper care of their health."

- 12 HPB is currently working on the following to improve health literacy:
- a) Develop a Health Literacy Measurement Tool to establish standards of health literacy in Singapore
 - b) Issue Plain Language Guidelines to all health-related sectors, to ensure that health education materials are easy to understand and include a simple call to action
 - c) Inclusion of health literacy in training curriculum for all health and allied health professionals as well as Health Ambassadors.

Developing health-promoting ecosystems across Singapore

13 To further empower Singapore residents to take charge of their health, HPB is also introducing health-promoting ecosystems across Singapore. “Comprising health-promoting malls, schools, MRT stations, community clubs and hawker centres, these health-promoting ecosystems are conveniently designed and placed throughout the island to make healthy living easily accessible to every family in Singapore. By participating in mall walks regularly, enjoying healthy set meals in schools, using the stairs more frequently at train stations and consuming healthy whole-grain hawker fare, good healthy habits will gradually become part of our daily lives,” said Mr Ang.

Customising neighbourhood health facilities for residents

14 In addition, HPB is developing a Community Health Assessment Tool (CHAT) to help local constituencies measure the health literacy of their residents. This will allow community clubs to better assess the needs of their residents as well as guide them in the planning of activities.

15 HPB will then work with the CDCs to tailor specific programmes to meet the health needs of their residents, while health ambassadors will help implement the activities and promote healthy messages.

Tracking healthy progress the smart way

16 NHLC 2011 will also see the launch of the Interactive Diet and Activity Tracker (iDAT), a free smartphone application to help Singapore residents better manage their personal health.

17 “HPB developed the iDAT to help Singapore residents set realistic fitness goals by allowing them to figure out how much to eat or exercise daily in order to maintain a healthy weight,” said Mr Ang. “The iDAT also has its own social online community, which means that users can motivate and ‘challenge’ one another, or organise group activities such as charity walks. Organisations or groups may even create their own online communities for campaigns or programmes.”

18 A fully integrated health application designed to track both food intake and physical activity, and calculate a user's calorie balance, iDAT is the first application in the world that is programmed with a scientifically-based algorithm specially designed for Singaporeans. Its calorie recommendations take into consideration the body types of Asians as well as the working lifestyle of Singaporeans.

Leveraging whole-of-Singapore collaborations

19 Commenting on these new programmes and initiatives, Mr Ang said: "It's about leveraging the three 'P's – the People in the community, the Public sector and the Private enterprises – to bring about a truly health-conscious and health-literate Singapore, where people can find, understand and use health-related information and services to enhance their quality of life."

20 Some of HPB's partners include the Ministry of Education (MOE); Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS); National Parks Board (NParks); retail, food and fitness industries; as well as the People's Association (PA), whose Wellness Programme seeks to empower seniors aged 50 and above to lead healthy and active lives.

21 In collaboration with PA and grassroots organisations, for example, HPB will be transforming the Sengkang Community Club into a health promoting centre. In addition to visual cues and interactive exhibits reminding residents to adopt a healthy lifestyle, the Community Club will also have a team of grassroots Health Ambassadors to carry out simple BMI and blood pressure tests, give advice on follow-up medical care, and encourage residents to take up relevant, health-promoting activities organised by the Community Club.

Annex 1 Health Ambassador Network (HAN)

Annex 2 Health Literacy

Annex 3 Interactive Diet and Activity Tracker (iDAT)

Issued by Health Promotion Board

Health Ambassador Network (HAN)

As part of the 3Ps (people in the community, public sector and the private enterprises) approach, HPB will be tapping into the power of social networks - leveraging on the network of Health Ambassadors to create a healthy living social movement to:

- Disseminate HPB's health messages to the community.
- Empower the community to be health literate.
- Provide effective peer support to introduce and sustain behaviour change in individuals.
- Catalyse the recruitment of more Health Ambassadors in the community.

The Health Ambassador Network (HAN) Department has been formed to establish and manage the framework for effective recruitment, training, engagement/support, evaluation and recognition of the Health Ambassadors.

A HPB Health Ambassador should be practising healthy living, i.e. regular physical activity, healthy eating, not smoking and staying positive and having regular screening. He/she is passionate about helping others lead a healthy lifestyle and is committed to participate in HPB activities on a regular basis.

He/she can choose the following role(s):



Engagement Framework

- **Training:** Equipping Health Ambassadors with the knowledge and skills to help them carry out their role(s) well.
- **Supervision/Support:** Providing feedback to Health Ambassadors through regular group meetings and networking sessions.
- **Recognition:** Recognising and motivating the Health Ambassadors for their efforts and contribution such as testimonial features in media/newsletters, invitations to annual appreciation dinner and award ceremony, etc.
- **Evaluation:** Annual reviews by HAN and Ambassador Leaders to provide performance feedback to Health Ambassadors.

HAN will also be forming an Ambassador Leader Committee in the respective CDCs. Each Ambassador Leader Committee will plan and implement activities specific to the various ambassador interest groups of the various CCs. Activities include:

- Conducting simple health screening, e.g. measure Body Mass Index (BMI) and take blood pressure, recruit and mentor residents towards healthy living.
- Educating residents on healthy living and health literacy at the Healthy Lifestyle Corner of the CC.
- Providing follow-up and support to residents including encouraging residents to see a doctor, if need be.
- Inviting residents to participate in healthy lifestyle courses, workshops or seminars.

Examples of Interest Groups

I Quit Champions

These Champions are ex-smokers who have managed to overcome the challenges of quitting smoking and are very passionate about helping others quit the habit. Through the I Quit Club Facebook page, “White Belt” training sessions are organised for the ex-smokers, and thereby transforming the virtual Club on Facebook into a face-to-face platform for the I Quit Champions to meet up and learn new skills.

Healthy Agers

The Healthy Agers are older adults (aged ≥ 40 years) recruited originally under the Senior Health Ambassador Programme, launched in March 2011. This group of Health Ambassadors are trained and equipped with knowledge and skills on healthy ageing related topics as well as communication and mentoring. These Health Ambassadors will then reach out to their social networks to mentor and empower their peers through a series of engagement initiatives on healthy ageing, such as workshops, talks, exercise classes, sharing sessions, roadshows and one-to-one health discussion sessions.

Lose-to-Win Champions

Lose to Win (LTW) is a holistic weight management programme initiated in 2009 which has successfully encouraged overweight individuals to lose weight the healthy way. Past participants who have benefitted from the LTW experience and are interested in helping others to lose weight the healthy way will be recruited to be Champions. They will help new participants lose weight the healthy way, raise awareness of losing weight the healthy way, and create and strengthen social support networks for weight loss and maintenance.

Brisk Walking Champions

Brisk walking leaders from the various CDCs/CCs who have been trained by HPB on brisk walking techniques will be recruited to be Champions to educate and motivate their brisk walking group members on other aspects of healthy living, as well as to create and strengthen support networks for physical activity.

To sign up as a Health Ambassador, please log onto HPB’s website <http://www.hpb.gov.sg/healthambassador.aspx> or email HPB_HAN@hpb.gov.sg

Health Literacy

Background

Recent research has demonstrated that while general literacy levels are important, high levels of the same do not necessarily imply good health outcomes in a population.¹ Singapore has a high level of literacy, with almost 96% of its population aged 15 and above being literate.² However as evidence demonstrates, this does not necessarily translate into high levels of health literacy and consequently, better health outcomes.

Health literacy in Singapore

As in many parts of the world, health literacy in Singapore is a relatively new area, albeit one that has important ramifications for health promotion and disease prevention.

There is no data on the levels of health literacy in Singapore. However, HPB is working to fill this gap by developing a survey that will serve to establish a baseline against which to measure progress in health literacy in future assessments. The survey will be developed and pre-tested by the second half of 2012 and administered nationally in 2013 to Singaporeans and Permanent Residents between the ages of 18 and 69.

In addition to assessing the existing levels of health literacy in Singapore, the survey will also serve to inform and guide future health literacy initiatives and programmes.

The Health Promotion Board (HPB) defines health literacy as “the degree to which people have the ability to obtain, understand, assess and communicate health information and services needed to guide healthier decisions. These decisions occur at home, at work, in school, in the healthcare system and in society as a whole”.³

As one of the principal organisations charged with safeguarding the health of Singapore, HPB sees itself as a major change agent and facilitator for improving health literacy. HPB has developed an Action Plan to improve Health Literacy in Singapore which identifies the following priority areas:

- supporting health literacy research,
- evaluation, training and practice,
- enhancing the dissemination of timely, accurate and appropriate health information to health professionals and the public,
- designing health literacy improvements to healthcare and public health systems that enhance access to health services

HPB will work closely with its partners across the healthcare family to achieve its vision for a health literate Singapore “where people can find, understand and use health-related information and services that will guide them in making informed health-related decisions to enhance their quality of life”.

HPB is currently working on the following to improve health literacy:

- **Plain Language Guidelines**

The concept of health literacy extends beyond an individual being able to gain access to health information. Access to information does not necessarily imply that the information will be easily understood or that it can be translated into action.

¹ Crawley, 2000; UNICEF, 2000; cited in Kickbusch Ilona S. *Health Literacy: Addressing the Health and Education Divide Health Promotion International 2001*; Vol.16, No.3 289-297

² Department of Statistics, *Singapore, Yearbook of Statistics, 2009*
<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/reference/yos09/yos2009.pdf>

³ The definition is adopted by the HPB Health Literacy Team, in consultation with Dr Wayne Mitic. Original definition developed by Rootman, I. (2006) in *The Development and Validation of Measures of Health Literacy in different populations*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia

In order to empower people to make informed decisions about their health, it is important that they not only know where to get appropriate information but that they are able to understand and analyse that information, make decisions based upon it and be able to communicate it accurately if necessary.

To this end, HPB has developed a set of guidelines to ensure that health education materials produced are written in plain language and can easily understood by the public.

- **Health Literacy Measurement Tool**

To establish a baseline of healthy literacy levels as well as to collect data which will inform and guide the planning of subsequent initiatives.

- **Capacity Building**

Health literacy also extends to the realm of patient-professional communication, understanding prescriptions and medication labels and being able to effectively and safely navigate the healthcare system.

In its bid to make Singapore health literate, HPB is also working to build capacity for healthcare professionals (e.g. GPs, Pharmacists) on ensuring health literate communication with their patients/clients.

HPB will simultaneously work within the community to increase the awareness of the importance of health literacy amongst the population via public education roadshows and multiple media channels.

This will include empowering individuals to ask questions regarding their health, actively seeking and clarifying information, and learning how to read and interpret medicine labels and prescriptions. Equipping individuals with better health literacy skills will enable them to make informed health decisions leading to better health outcomes.

Interactive Diet and Activity Tracker (iDAT)

Self monitoring of diet and physical activity is the cornerstone of any health and fitness programme. Thus the Health Promotion Board (HPB) set out on a mission one year ago, to develop an easy-to-use state of the art and science smartphone application (APP), just for Singaporeans.

Key features include:

- goal setting
- motivation
- social networking
- recognition of diet and physical activity patterns, and
- simplicity of use

iDAT is an **i**nteractive **D**iet and **A**ctivity **T**racker developed by HPB. It is a comprehensive mobile phone application created through the integration and upgrading of some of HPB's existing applications.

iDAT is designed to enable users to track their daily food intake and physical activity to determine caloric balance. The “**left to consume**” feature provides a very clear understanding of where you are in a day, as far as how much you can eat.

Caloric balance tracking enables users to make informed dietary and physical activity choices throughout the day based on their individual goals of weight loss or maintaining a healthy weight.

Physical activity can be tracked by calories burned, kilometres calculated, minutes accumulated. You can also monitor your pace or heart rate. iDAT allows you to use global positioning system (GPS) or direct input to track your physical activity.

The iDAT is the first application that is programmed with a scientifically-based algorithm, specially designed for Singaporeans. Many available applications are developed for western populations and do not take into consideration the body types of Asians, or the daily working lifestyle of Singaporeans. Therefore the caloric recommendations can be misleading.

The iDAT also features localised diet and physical activity choices that are popular with the Singapore population.

iDAT will be available to android and i-phone users, from 22 October 2011, free of charge.

A synchronised and customised website for iDAT is also available. In addition to the functions available on the mobile application, it has its own social network online web community that allows users to challenge their friends or organise groups.

Individuals can do more detailed tracking on their personal websites. Organisations or groups can also create their own sub-websites for campaigns or programmes, including incentive-based programmes such as virtual walkathons, charity walks, or activity programmes.

On the horizon, iDAT will add:

- Pedometer function
- Fitness Finder (find an activity in your geographic region)
- More food choices
- Fitness assessment with tailored advice