

# Diabetes must not be taken for granted, could become a ‘big headache’ for policymakers

Semira Abbas Shalan Sunday, 12 November 2023



Professors at the University of Malta’s Department of Podiatry warned that diabetes must not be taken for granted and it could become a “big headache” for policymakers and the country’s expenses in as little as a decade or two, if the rate of persons with diabetes keeps increasing.

Professors Cynthia Formosa and Alfred Gatt spoke to *The Malta Independent on Sunday* to raise awareness for World Diabetes Day, which is celebrated on 14 November, primarily urging people to get checked.

On World Diabetes Day, people with diabetes, are at risk of diabetes or have someone in the family with diabetes, are reminded about this condition, and urged to do all the necessary checks, whatever their age, given that this condition has a very high prevalence rate worldwide, but especially within the Maltese population, Formosa said. Gatt, along with Formosa and Dr Marvin Bugeja, together with a team of podiatrists and engineers, are leading a project titled The Smart Insole technology for the management of the diabetic foot, in collaboration with Mater Dei Hospital.

The device will attempt to reduce the incidence of diabetic foot complications in persons with diabetes. The product, which is being funded by the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST), would automatically screen the patient, taking the form of an insole.

It will also measure foot pressures and temperatures, and from that data, specialists can know if that patient has a possibility of developing complications.

Formosa said that World Diabetes Day raises awareness for people to check their eyes, kidneys, circulation and sensation, and the feet, which is the area of expertise for the podiatrists.

"We want to remind all people with diabetes that if they have not been checking, they need to visit their podiatrist at least once a year, to make sure that everything is intact," Formosa said, adding that if these checks are in place, then it could prevent further complications such as ulcerations and amputations.

Gatt said that complications would lead to hospitalisations, lack of work and pressure on the system.

He continued that this is very important as in the past 25 years, there have been a lot of medical discoveries and improvements in diabetes' treatment. However, recent studies have shown that despite the increase in the medical field, there are still a lot of amputations worldwide.

"Here is where the crux lies – is it a failure of the health system? Or is it because people themselves don't bother to check? That's why awareness is so important," Gatt said, adding that one can take the horse to the water, but they cannot make it drink.

"I can have the best services available, and we really have good services in Malta, but if the persons living with diabetes themselves do not take themselves for regular check-ups, then it's all for nothing," Gatt said, with Formosa adding that it is important for these people to actually make use of the existing services.

Gatt said that the awareness needs to start with the patients themselves and unless they access the services now, then they might need them when it is too late, encouraging these persons to be proactive.

The professors were asked about a lack of options for people with diabetes in restaurants and food establishments.

Gatt said that aside from many restaurants not providing diabetic-friendly options, high calorific food is the cheapest food.

Formosa said that high calorific food is not good for people with diabetes, especially for youths.

She said that when talking about diabetes, one must not forget the paediatric (0-16 years of age) and young (20-40) population. "We might get the geriatric population (65+) who do come directly to us, but how often do we see young people come to us?"

Formosa said.

Gatt continued that an upcoming research paper shows that feet of children with type 1 Diabetes are already affected bio-mechanically. He said that this could be because the glucose (blood sugar) gets deposited in the muscles and soft tissue and they would not be able to function as they should.

"Even at a very early stage, although these persons might still be young and they don't really feel the effect of it, there are already changes which are happening due to diabetes," Gatt said.

He added that often, obesity comes hand in hand with diabetes, and with children, the joints in the lower limbs, already have a substantially high amount of pressure on them, meaning they will have problems later on in life.

Formosa said that Europe ranks second in child obesity in the world, and this is a problem which is known, especially in Malta.

"There is childhood obesity and high prevalence of diabetes worldwide. We know that diabetes has a genetic predisposition and Malta, being a small country, has a higher chance of these genes being passed on within families, so if we are not careful, even from an early stage, then diabetes will explode in Malta, in the next 10 to 20 years," Formosa said.

She said that unfortunately, in Malta, many restaurants and cafeterias do not cater for many diseases, even for people who are simply on a diet. Formosa continued that government must sit down at the drawing board, acknowledge the increase in the rate of diabetes and start coming up with opportunities to address it.

"Today, there are a lot of sugar-free products on the market. Why is it that if you had to ask a restaurant for sugar-free ice cream, for example, they do not have it?" Formosa said, suggesting another idea where restaurants could have a section in their menu for sugar-free products and low-calorie meals and dessert options.

She said that this also affects youths, who go out with their friends, and have to either not eat anything on the menu, or not go altogether.

Formosa said that there could be more initiatives for people to engage in sports and attend gyms, for government to further encourage exercise, such as, for example, better rates for youths.

"If we really want to talk about World Diabetes Day and awareness with regards to diabetes, we need to tackle diabetes from all aspects," Formosa said, listing food, exercise, training, and on their end, the person's foot health.

She said that the team at the university is always conducting research with regards to the diabetic foot at all levels and all ages.

The sole the research team is working on can also help youths by checking their foot from an early stage, so that podiatrists can act immediately.

"We shouldn't wait for the problem to get worse for these young people, including those of 30, 40 years of age, who are still in their prime," Formosa said, adding that pre-diabetes should also be given attention to, referring to people who are on the borderline of possibly being diagnosed with diabetes.

She said that if one knows that they have high pressure in their foot, they must act upon it, and not wait until it develops into an ulcer or a callous, as it would be too late.

Gatt continued to say that people, even those with diabetes, should not adopt a mindset that the "worst" could not possibly happen to them.

"It's like burying your head in the sand and avoiding the problem," Gatt said, adding that complications can happen to anyone.

"In Malta, everyone has diabetes within their family. The message on this day should be for those people, especially who have not tested for diabetes, to start by getting their

check-ups done, whatever your age," Formosa continued to say, even those at a pre-diabetes stage, advising them to go to their dermatologist, nutritionist and most importantly from their end, a podiatrist.

She said that through these check-ups "we can try to look after this disease" as if not, diabetes will become a big burden for the country.

Formosa said that she felt that the condition is not being taken seriously, even by policymakers.

"If something is not done urgently, in 20 years' time this could really hit us, with regards to the budget for health," Formosa said, adding that if diabetes had to keep increasing, the expense for free medicine for diabetes will be large for the country.

If today, the government is servicing 50,000 people with free footwear and medicine for people with diabetes, in 20 years' time, government will have to start offering these services for 100,000 people.

"The budget will reflect this," Formosa said, questioning if the government would be able to cover these expenses, describing it as a possible 'big headache' for policymakers and decision making, as well as for the services.

Mentioning human resources, Formosa said that the number of podiatrists would have to double if diabetes increased, not mentioning dermatologists, nutritionists and other healthcare professionals, who together work as a team to try to combat this condition.

Gatt said that diabetes must not be taken for granted, whatever a person's age.

On World Diabetes Day, the whole world celebrates the day to raise awareness, as is done for other diseases through their campaigns, Formosa said.

She said that some businesses had sales on furniture for the month of October, which is Breast Cancer Awareness month.

Formosa said that if this seems to be working to raise awareness, then during this month, which is the month for awareness for diabetes, similar initiatives could happen.

"Gyms, for example, could raise awareness by reducing the rate for people who register in November," Formosa said, adding that sugar-free products in supermarkets could also be set at a reduced price this month, mentioning reduced prices on vegan products during meat-free week. With supermarkets' marketing, this could reach people easily, she said.

"We need to start from there," Formosa concluded.



**Caption**

**Dr Ing. Clifford DeRaffaele, Prof. Cynthia Formosa, Ms Claire Saliba Thorne, Prof. Alfred Gatt, Dr Ing. Marvin Bugeja and Ing. Anthony Saliba**