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YOUR SAY

Hospices have had to turn away terminally ill patients because of a sharp increase in numbers in recent years. The Ministry of Health says it is exploring if it should increase the facilities at hospices. Join the discussion at [www.straitstimes.com](http://www.straitstimes.com)

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# BED CRUNCH AT HOSPICES

## Some terminally ill patients put on waiting list as demand grows

By JOAN CHEW

HOSPICES are so short of beds that terminally ill patients sometimes have to be put on a waiting list for a place, with some dying before they can be admitted.

On some days, two of the four hospices here, Dover Park and Assisi, have 10 to 20 patients waiting to get in, they said. The waiting time at Assisi can be up to two weeks.

Together with Bright Vision Hospital and St Joseph's Home and Hospice, which were not able to give figures, they provide some 130 beds for a population whose demand for such care is growing as it ages.

In 2008, 1,188 patients needed hospice beds and another 3,913 sought palliative care at home. The figures for last year are not yet available.

The Health Ministry said it was aware of the growing demand and was "gearing up" to expand bed capacity, as well as to recruit and train more palliative specialists such as doctors and nurses.

Hospices admit terminally ill patients who cannot be cared for at home, or who need temporary alleviation of distressing symptoms. They offer special care for the dying that cannot be provided by hospitals or nursing homes.

Ms Irene Chan, 41, the administrator at Assisi Hospice, said last year saw an all-time high of days it was full. The rise in numbers came from more referrals

from hospitals and nursing homes, and greater public awareness of its services.

Assisi has 33 beds and ran at an average occupancy of 87 per cent last year. Altogether, it cared for 1,138 patients through its day centre, home care and in-patient services, an increase of 4.6 per cent from the previous year.

There will be no let-up this year, said Ms Chan: "There is no immediate increase in the number of beds for the hospice sector, our population is still ageing, and disease patterns will continue. There is also no new service that will help to alleviate this shortage."

In a bed crunch, it asks patients to consider other options, such as home care or other hospices.

Dover Park Hospice saw an increase of 15 per cent last year over 2008's figures. The in-patient-only facility cared for 461 people last year.

Its 40 beds are almost always occupied, with just "one or two empty beds at any one time", said its spokesman.

The hospice must keep an empty ward on standby for isolation cases or to cater for the time lapse between a death or discharge and a new admission.

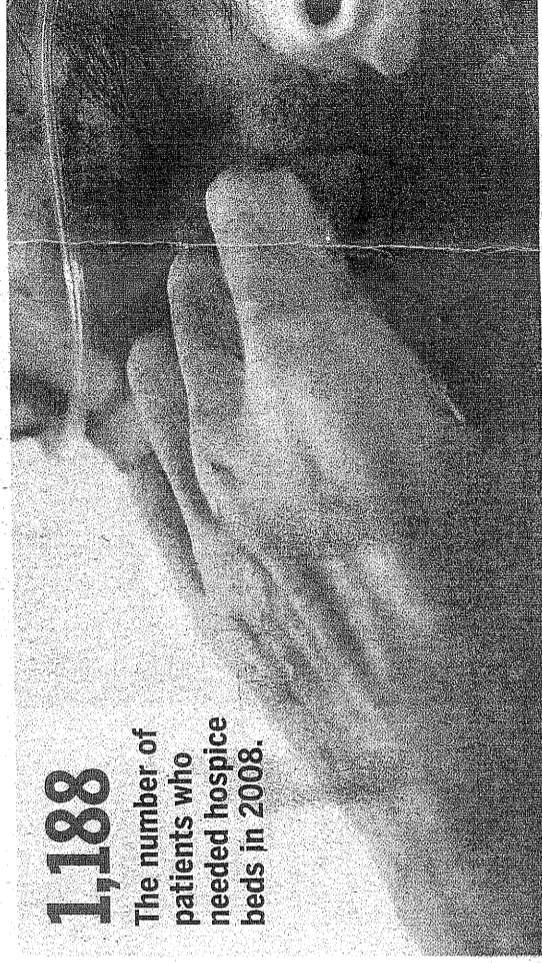
Its medical director Angel Lee said the urgency for palliative care is growing. "More people are out in the workforce and they have less ability to cope with the terminally ill at home. If we do not catch up with their needs, care of patients will eventually suffer. They may end up in hospitals, not necessarily the best place to care for pa-



Hospices like Assisi (above) admit terminally ill patients who cannot be cared for at home, or who need temporary alleviation of distressing symptoms. The Health Ministry said it was aware of the growing demand and was "gearing up" to expand bed capacity. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

## 1,188

### The number of patients who needed hospice beds in 2008.



tients suffering from terminal illnesses." The hospice plans to add eight beds, she said.

Assisi also plans to increase its headcount of 73 staff by 10 per cent.

Alongside in-patient hospice care, demand for such care at home is also holding steady. HCA Hospice Care, the largest hospice home-care service in Singapore, took care of 3,283 patients at home and 717 patients in its day-care centre between April 2008 and March last year.

Its CEO and medical director R. Akhileswaran said a large part of the increase came from non-cancer patients who are now seeking palliative care at home. More than half of these are in end-stage renal failure.

[joanchew@sph.com.sg](mailto:joanchew@sph.com.sg)