



Dr Goh's appointment as co-head of the worldwide palliative care alliance puts Singapore on the map in the field of caring for the dying. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Palliative doctor takes on global role

■ BY JESSICA JAGANATHAN

SHE has been holding the hands of the dying since she was a volunteer doctor at St Joseph's Home and Hospice in 1986.

Dr Cynthia Goh, who gives her age as "in my 50s", is still doing so, on a bigger stage, as co-chairman of a newly set-up world alliance on palliative care.

The job of palliative care doctors: To relieve pain and raise the quality of life for dying patients.

It is a field that has become increasingly critical as an ageing population succumbs to terminal diseases

such as end-stage cancer and advanced renal failure.

Dr Goh, who is married with two children, graduated in 1974 from London University and went on to specialise in internal medicine, before pursuing her interest in palliative care.

With parents in their 80s, she understands what older people need. She speaks Cantonese, "bad Hokkien and just a few words of Malay" to relate better with her patients.

The worldwide palliative care alliance is a registered charity based in Britain. Mr David Prall, chief executive of UK-based charity Help the Hospices, is the other co-chair.

Dr Goh's stints since her volunteer days include being the founder president of the Hospice Care Association and medical director of Assisi Home and Hospice.

She is now spearheading a research project with Duke-NUS medical school and Lien Centre for Palliative Care to collate local data on palliative care.

Her appointment puts Singapore on the map for palliative care.

"A lot of people are interested in our work because we are not from Western developed countries and people generally feel that palliative care has to be culturally appropriate," she told *The Straits Times*.

Singapore's multicultural population can provide a learning ground for other Asia-Pacific countries new to palliative care, said Dr Goh, an associate professor at Duke-NUS and head of the department of palliative medicine at the National Cancer Centre Singapore.

She reckons that 65 per cent of the 17,000 who die here every year need palliative care, but only about 20 per cent actually receive it.

So they live on in pain although pain medication is available, and live out their last days in hospices and hospitals instead of at home.

This is expected to change with the Government's emphasis on "dying a good death" and plans to train more palliative care specialists and related staff to support the sector.

The idea of a formal alliance was forged by a group of 12 doctors and administrative staff around the world, including Australia, South Africa and Canada. They had been meeting regularly since 2003 to work on aspects of palliative care.

Key areas the group has been working on include advocacy, education and training, policy development, quality of standards and research.

One of its triumphs was when its advocacy group championed for palliative care to be added to the World Health Assembly's resolution on cancer prevention and control in 2005.

Dr R. Akhileswaran, chief executive officer and medical director of HCA Hospice Care, suggested that the alliance look at honing leadership in palliative care.

Another area: Making certain pain management medication like morphine more widely available, especially in developing countries.

Dr Goh agrees. "There are a lot of people in pain and a lot of pain medication is not available in many countries," she said.

jessicaj@sph.com.sg