

We deal with patients who are facing death ... they share with you a lot of their feelings and what they are going through. It can be quite emotionally draining.

[DR DO SU ERN ON THE EMOTIONAL DEMANDS OF HIS JOB AS A HOMECARE DOCTOR WITH HCA HOSPICE CARE.]



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CLUTCHING my schoolbag as tightly as I could, against my sweat-soaked uniform, the anxiety grew as I raced through the hospital corridors.

Reaching the room, my heart beat even faster. "Here it is," I thought to myself, taking a long, deep breath as I pushed open the door slowly. I did not make it in time.

The hospital bed was empty. Perhaps Grandpa had made a miraculous recovery and was allowed to go home. That hope was quashed soon after as I learnt that Grandpa had succumbed to pneumonia and died less than half an hour earlier.

A decade on, that scene remains vivid. It replayed itself again — for the umpteenth time — in my wandering mind, as Dr Do Su Ern, a homocare doctor with HCA Hospice Care for the past seven years, pondered over how he would face up to the inevitability himself.

"Seeing the courage in some patients ... I wonder if I will have the same courage when I'm faced with the same situation," said Dr Do, 39, who visits about six to seven terminally-ill patients each day, six days a week.

I was about to accompany Dr Do on his rounds on Thursday — to observe, first hand and close up, professionals working with the dying: Men and women who, to the rest of us, seem to be heroic or, perhaps, even saintly.

But as I would later realise, they are just ordinary people on a mission: To bring comfort to their fellow men and women in their final days, and closure to their bereaved families.

Dr Do's soft-spoken demeanour belied the emotional demands of a job he took up right after his mother died of cancer in 2001. Previously working in a hospital, he was inspired by the work of the HCA — a charity funded by donations and grants from the Health Ministry — in tending to his ailing mother.

"We deal with patients who are facing death ... they share with you a lot of their feelings ... it can be quite emotionally draining," he said.

Ms Alice Heng, 55, the nurse accompanying Dr Do on his rounds that day reiterated that the job of palliative homocare workers is not for the feeble-hearted.

For one, it is not uncommon for such workers to be drawn into family conflicts.

From being a mid-wife, to a Civil Defence paramedic, and to her present job as a hospice homocare nurse, Ms Heng knows all about managing life's various phases.

"I've brought life into the world, I've tended to the sick and injured — and now I look after dying people," she said wryly.

But even she was touched by a particularly heartwrenching moment.

"The patient, who was in her 70s, gritted her teeth and tried not to show any signs of

discomfort as her daughter was re-dressing her wounds. But we could see she was in a lot of pain. The daughter was fighting back her tears ... so was I," said Ms Heng, who added that the doctors and nurses would turn to HCA's in-house counsellors should the emotional strains become too much to bear.

As we made our way to the flat where one of Dr Do's patients, Madam Mohideen Miral lived, Ms Heng shared her experiences with me.

I wasn't entirely listening — I had other things on my mind: How does one accept death? How would I live my last days? Do I want to be at home in the company of my loved ones? Or would I rather be somewhere else so that my loved ones do not have to witness my pain?

#### A FAMILY'S BATTLE

Madam Miral knows what it feels like to face death. In June, the 68-year-old devout Muslim was given just six days to live — about two months after she was first diagnosed with lymphoma, a type of cancer involving lymphocytes, or cells of the immune system.

"The doctors told us to arrange for the funeral. We brought her home and gathered all our relatives, and we prayed for her overnight," recalled her daughter Sha Broon Naesha, 48.

"The next day, she opened her eyes and gradually became better. It was a miracle."

For now, Mdm Miral, who takes her prayer beads everywhere she goes, continues her battle with cancer. Unsuitable for chemotherapy, Mdm Miral relies on morphine, panadol and other pills with unpronounceable names.

She is unable to stand for long periods yet Mdm Miral's swollen legs also make it painful for her to sit down.

As the doctor and nurse tended to Mdm Miral in the bedroom — on a typical home visit, the doctor monitors a patient's symptoms; adjusts the medication accordingly; and administer injections if necessary — her daughter looked on attentively.

It did not feel like a home visit. It felt more like a gathering of concerned friends, except that these friends actually knew a thing or two about medicine.

"Are you able to sleep well at night?" Ms Heng asked Mdm Miral as she held her hand. "You shouldn't be taking both panadol and morphine together," Ms Heng added. Mdm Miral nodded.

Mdm Naesha tells me that her mother is happy that she does not have to spend her days on a hospital bed while her family mulls over hefty hospitalisation bills.

"Even when she was very ill, she refused to be admitted to hospital but we had to. She cried to us on the phone," said Mdm Naesha, who has two daughters and works the night shift as a security guard — so that she can look after her mother during the day.

I observed the tiredness in Mdm Naesha's

eyes. "Do you ever sleep?" I asked. She replied that a two-hour break during her 12-hour shift is all the time she has to get some shut-eye. "It's not even sleep ... but I get to rest. I'm used to it already," she added with a weary smile.

#### FIGHTING TILL THE END

No one likes talking about death — much less contemplating it. For Ms Heng, her greatest satisfaction is getting family members to come to terms with saying goodbye.

"This process is not easy but through our visits and assurances, one by one, the family members come to accept it," said Ms Heng.

More than just medical practitioners, palliative homocare workers often double up as counsellors, managing the patients' emotional and spiritual needs.

But it is not just the patient's spirits that are lifted. For the doctors and nurses, every home visit is a valuable lesson about life.

Ms Heng remembers a 40-year-old, who contracted colon cancer at the height of his career. Struggling to accept his fate, he hated the sight of his bloated stomach.

But during his final days, he finally came to terms with his illness. Wearing multiple layers of clothes, he took his wife to their favourite restaurant — even though he was in pain and could neither eat nor drink.

#### But it's not struggling. It's just part of the process of dying.

[ALICE HENG, NURSE]

Or the 70-year-old man who had lived alone, and had a feeding tube around his ear and through his nostril. He refused to be cooped up at home because of people's curious stares.

Said Ms Heng: "He said to me: 'If people stare at me, I'll stare back at them!'"

"They have all passed on but I still remember them. I learn from them ... their spirit."

Based on her experience, Ms Heng believes most elderly patients prefer to spend their last days at home but family members are not always for the idea.

"In Hong Kong, people try all means possible not to let someone die at home — it affects the property prices," Ms Heng said.

"Here, some people cannot bear to see their loved one struggling on his death bed."

That hit me hard. Perhaps that was why I kept putting off visiting my grandfather before I did so eventually — but belatedly.

I was afraid of being confronted with the image of a withered man — a far cry from my memories of a towering figure whom I both feared and respected deeply as a child.

My train of thought was interrupted one last time. "But it's not struggling. It's just part of the process of dying," she continued.

If only someone had told me that a decade ago.

As part of its 20th anniversary celebrations, HCA Hospice Care is holding a public forum on "Palliative Care — at Home and Beyond" from 2pm to 4pm at York Hotel, on Sept 13. For more details, call 6891-9535 or email your name and contact number to [info@hcahospicecare.org.sg](mailto:info@hcahospicecare.org.sg).

# IN THEIR FINAL HOURS

Loh Chee Kong follows a hospice team and learns about life and death at home