

Lianhe Zaobao – 26 September 2011

Lack of Public Awareness of Hospice Care in Singapore

They are the guardian angels of the terminally ill in Singapore.

They help the dying patients to meet the changing physical, emotional and social needs, so that the patients will walk through their last journey with no fears.

Many people are unaware that the home care service provided by the doctors and nurses of HCA Hospice Care is free of charge, regardless of the financial status of the patient.

At present, HCA which relies on public and patient donations, provides hospice home care service to about 800 terminally ill patients. However, HCA would like to extend their assistance to more terminally ill patients and their family members, by providing nursing and medical care to manage patients' pain and symptoms, prescribing medicine, coaching families on how to care for their loved one at home, counselling individual and family, to enable patients to spend their last days with dignity and have a good quality of life.

A survey published last year on the quality of life of terminally ill patients during their last days showed that out of 17000 deaths annually, about 20% received hospice care.

Dr R Akhileswaran, CEO and Medical Director of HCA Hospice Care, attributed the low percentage of terminally ill patients receiving hospice care to the lack of awareness of hospice care among Singaporeans. He mentioned that many of the caregivers refused or delayed hospice care for the patients because they were afraid that the patients would not be able to come to term with their conditions.

But these caregivers were not aware that the patients have limited time, 72% of patients who admitted into hospice care service passed away within 3 months.

To Dr R Akhileswaran, removing Singaporeans' misconceptions about hospice care is a big challenge.

According to a survey conducted last year, only 40% of the public knew about hospice care.

Of particular concern is the lack of awareness of hospice care among Mandarin-speaking public.

Therefore, Singapore Hospice Council will put in more resources to educate and raise the public awareness among the Mandarin-speaking public about hospice care and how that would help to improve the quality of life for the terminally ill patients.

Including HCA, there are currently 8 organizations providing palliative and hospice care in Singapore.

Some of these organizations provide in-patient care, home care and day care.

90% of HCA patients are cancer patients, while patients with end-stage renal failure made up half of the remaining 10%.

To qualify for hospice home care service, patients have to be referred to HCA Hospice Care by their doctors. The doctor, either the patient's consultant at a hospital or a general practitioner from a private clinic, has to certify that the patients are terminally ill and life expectancy is at less than 12 months.

HCA Hospice Care has 6 full-time palliative-care doctors and 2 doctors who serve on part-time basis.

Although there is a lack of human resources currently, Dr R Akhileswaran is confident that with increased awareness of hospice and palliative care, more Healthcare professionals will be attracted into this service, in order to cope with the increasing demand for palliative care due to aging population.

The shortage of Healthcare professionals in hospice and palliative care has been slightly improved in the last 5 years.

After the recognition of palliative medicine as a subspecialty by MOH in 2006, more doctors have moved into practising palliative medicine.

5 years ago, only 6 doctors are qualified palliative care practitioners.

At present, there are at least another 10 doctors receiving training in palliative medicine.

In the past, patient's caregivers have reflected the reluctance of general practitioner to issue death certificate for patient who died at home.

Dr R Akhileswaran said that the general practitioner would not be willing to issue the death certificate due to the unavailability of patient's medical history.

On the other hand, caregivers of patients who received hospice care would be able to request the doctor-in-charge from the hospice care team to issue the death certificate upon patient's demise.

To coincide with the World Hospice and Palliative Care Day celebrations on 9th October 2011, Singapore Hospice Council has organized 2 fund-raising events.

Besides "Voices for Hospices 2011", the charity concert to be held on 8th October, there will be a mass cycling event "World Hospice Day Ride 2011" on 16th October.

The Singapore Hospice Council would like to attract at least 300 cyclists to participate in this event.

For more information, please visit the website at www.hospicedayride.sg or call 62562677 for enquiry.