

# More trained palliative care nurses

They number around 600 now, up from 23 four years ago; MOH wants to attract more to this field

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JUST four years ago, Singapore had 23 nurses trained in palliative care, looking after patients in the end stage of their lives.

Now there are around 600, almost half of whom have qualified this year, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has told *The Sunday Times*.

It aims to attract more health-care professionals to this field, which was recognised here only five years ago.

The number of people needing palliative care in Singapore is expected to double to more than 10,000 a year by 2020.

One person who is looking to help them is Madam Sukhdev Kaur, 43. After more than 25 years at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, where she worked as a nurse specialising in cancer care, she decided to switch to palliative care two years ago.

She spent eight months training in palliative nursing at Nanyang Polytechnic and now works at the Assisi Hospice.

The compassionate mother of three loves her new job and explained: "I've always been interested to know what happens to my cancer patients after they have tried everything and failed. How do they manage in their last days?"

Now, she helps them manage.

Singapore also has 41 registered palliative care doctors. There were none five years ago.

The money for experimental and expansion projects in the sector will come from a \$45.6 million fund – from the Government and Tote Board – set up in 2009 which lasts until 2015.

Successful projects will be offered continual funding.

One beneficiary of the palliative care fund has been Dover Park Hospice, which added 10 extra beds last year. Its recurring expenses are now funded permanently by the ministry.

Palliative care started as help for cancer patients who might suffer from excruciating pain in their final days. Cancer is the major killer in Singapore, accounting for 30 per cent of deaths.

Palliative care has expanded to include other terminally ill patients, such as those suffering from end-stage organ failure.

One in six palliative care patients needs in-patient care while the rest continue to live at home with loved ones, with care provided by visiting doctors and nurses.

Hua Mei Mobile Clinic, funded by the Tsao Foundation, treats elderly patients who are slowly deteriorating from advanced dementia or multiple strokes, coupled with frequent infections.

Star Pals looks after children with a variety of diseases that mean they are unlikely to live beyond their adolescence.

Today, there are nine organisations providing in-patient and home palliative care. The biggest are the HCA Hospice Care, which looks after about 3,000 people a year; Assisi Hospice, which cares for 1,000; and Dover Park Hospice, which handles 700.

Dover Park increased its number of beds from 40 to 50 last year while Assisi is building a new hospice which will see bed numbers go up from 37 to 85 in 2016.

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