

S'pore team on palliative care project in Myanmar

Move to train hospital staff is part of \$1.8m plan covering 4 Asian nations

By **JANICE TAI**
IN YANGON

FOR the first time, doctors and nurses in Myanmar are being trained on how to help their terminally ill die with dignity and the minimum possible pain.

A group of 27 doctors, nurses and medical social workers from 11 hospitals in Myanmar received training from five palliative care specialists from Singapore and Australia who flew in last week.

It is part of a \$1.8 million initiative by the Lien Foundation to build expertise in palliative care in four Asian countries over the next four years, starting with Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Singapore's Lien Foundation partnered Myanmar's Ministry of Health and the Myanmar Medical Association (MMA) through the Asia Pacific Hospice Palliative Care Network (APHN) to launch the project at Yangon General Hospital last Monday.

Palliative care aims to raise the quality of life for patients with chronic life-threatening illnesses by preventing or minimising their suffering. For example, doctors might calibrate pain-killing drugs to ease a dying person's distress.

Other care providers will help the sufferer live their final days as actively as possible or discuss their concerns about death. They also help to support relatives involved in looking after them.

Palliative care is usually given to end-stage cancer patients in severe pain but may be extended to those with organ failure or neurological diseases, for example.

The Myanmar project was led by APHN chairman Cynthia Goh and Singapore Hospice Council

president R. Akhileswaran.

The team's one-week training stints will be held twice a year for the next three years.

"The need for palliative care in developing countries is urgent as it is in these countries that 80 per cent of cancers are diagnosed at the incurable stage, compared with 60 per cent in developed countries," said Dr Goh.

In Yangon, the number of cancer cases has tripled from 2008 to 300,000 and 90 per cent of sufferers do not receive adequate palliative care, said MMA secretary-general Myint Thaug.

Public hospitals in Myanmar do not have specialised palliative care units and doctors are not trained in it. "With only two privately-run 40-bedded hospices in Myanmar serving a population of 55 million, that is grossly insufficient," said Dr Akhileswaran.

Yet good palliative care does not require expensive machines but simply well-trained medical staff, said Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of the Lien Foundation.

"It is a necessity, not a luxury, that can be provided even with limited resources," he added.

The doctors being trained are leaders in their fields who will train others. They will learn how to recognise and manage pain and symptoms of the terminally ill.

The team also teaches them how to help patients die well by ensuring they have social, psychological and spiritual support.

One trainee, radiation oncologist Wah Wah Myint Zu, 38, said: "I want to reduce their suffering holistically. It is my dream to set up a palliative care unit in my hospital."

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Dr Cynthia Goh attending to cancer patient Nay Lin Thu, 16, as her course trainees, comprising doctors and nurses from Myanmar hospitals, look on. The programme, an initiative by the Lien Foundation, aims to build expertise in palliative care in the region. ST PHOTOS: MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN