

## THE STRAITS TIMES

Causes

# Helping hospice patients savour each moment



Patients at HCA Hospice Care tucking into their Christmas feast last Friday. Some patients, who have lost their appetite because of their treatment, have told Mr Ng how his food has enticed them to eat again. ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM

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**A group of volunteers prepares sumptuous feasts twice a week for the terminally ill, so they are able to take comfort in meals provided with much effort, care and kindness**

Sue-Ann Tan ✉ (mailto:suetan@sph.com.sg)

Peking duck wrapped in paper-thin pancakes, a large jelly shaped like a Christmas tree, turkey slices, honey-baked ham, reindeer cupcakes and snowman lollipops are fare not typically found in a hospice, even during festive periods.

But at HCA Hospice Care and the adjacent Dover Park Hospice near Novena MRT station, such feasts for patients are whipped up twice a week. The patients have a year or less to live, and every meal is precious for it could be their last.

For this reason, Mr Anson Ng, a 50-year-old car dealer, has been rallying volunteers to cook such sumptuous meals for the terminally ill at the two hospices. He has been doing it every Tuesday and Friday for the last seven years. And his group of volunteers has swelled from an initial three or four to about 20 now.

"I used to cook for the needy at Willing Hearts," he said, referring to the charity which runs a soup kitchen for the poor.

"Then I went with a doctor friend to a hospice and saw the bland food the patients were eating. I wanted to cook more special food for them, such as big prawns, fish and curry. I want to see them happy as they eat."

The patients at HCA Hospice Care are daycare ones while those at Dover Park are residents. While some may live past their year-long prognosis, others may not survive beyond three months.

ADVERTISING



"These people have very limited time, so I find it meaningful to help make each meal good in case it is their last," Mr Ng said. "The hospice staff tell me that for some, mine was really the last meal they ate."

Mr Ng typically goes to the market as early as 5am on the day he volunteers, to buy all the ingredients he needs for his cooking. At around 7.30am, he starts preparing the ingredients, chopping and cutting them. The food has to be ready to serve between 11am and noon.

When The Straits Times visited HCA Hospice Care last Friday, he and his volunteers had cooked a Christmas feast. "It's their final stage and we just want to ensure they die with dignity," he said.

Sometimes patients have special food requests and Mr Ng fulfils them as swiftly as he can.

"One Indian patient asked me to make chapati but I didn't know how, so I had to buy it. Another asked for Teochew porridge. I try to get the food as soon as possible because I never know if it would be their last request."

#### OFFERING THE BEST

**We give the patients the best. Unlike a hospital where the patients' salt or sugar intake is controlled, at a hospice, we can give them what they want to eat.**

To entice patients to eat, Mr Ng ensures the dishes are colourful. Slices of carrots and tomatoes are sometimes used to give his meals a touch of vibrancy. "Some patients tell me they have lost their appetite because of treatments like chemotherapy or the morphine they take. But because my food looks beautiful, they tell me they want to eat again."

Those who are too ill to eat solid foods are given ice cream and other kinds of soft foods.

MR ALDOUS LEE, 47, a pilot and long-time volunteer.

Said Ms Angeline Wee, chief executive of HCA Hospice Care: "If they can eat, we just let them eat. Their appetite does increase with good food. Some who won't eat will start eating if it's their favourite food."

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Mr Ng's volunteers tend to be professionals, from human resource managers to pilots. One long-time volunteer is pilot

Aldous Lee, 47, who has helped at the hospices for six years. He learnt to cook from his Peranakan grandmother at age 10.

"We give the patients the best," Mr Lee said. "Unlike a hospital where the patients' salt or sugar intake is controlled, at a hospice, we can give them what they want to eat."

Sometimes, families of patients ask why Mr Ng gives them food that may be considered unhealthy.

#### SEEING PATIENTS AS INDIVIDUALS

**We can't say we are wasting good food just because a person is dying. It's about respect and treating them as individuals. Many still have the energy and morale to continue. I want to cheer them up.**

He recalled a man asking the question. "Doctors told him his father was already going. The patients also know they are passing on. We don't want them to suffer more than they have to. It gives them comfort as they head towards life's end."

Even when a patient cannot eat everything on the plate, Mr Ng still gives each and every one the same portion of food. "We can't say we are wasting good food just because a person is dying. It's about respect and treating them as individuals. Many still have the energy and morale to continue. I want to cheer them up."

MR ANSON NG, who started the project, on giving each patient the same amount of food, even if some may find it difficult to finish everything on the plate.

Mr Ng also keeps some company till the end. He visits them at home and even arranges the last rites if their relatives are not present.

"It is not just about cooking, but being a listening ear," he said. "I don't lie and tell them they can be cured, but I always tell them to jiayou (Mandarin for 'keep going')."

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For retired housekeeper and HCA patient Lim Ah Chua, 80, Mr Ng and his volunteers are friends who brighten her day. "The food is very nice and everything they cook is my favourite," she

said with a smile.

CAUSES: Know of a group championing a less-known cause? E-mail us at [stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg](mailto:stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg).