

More private players enter caregiving sector



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BY KENNETH CHENG - FEBRUARY 7

SINGAPORE — After her 73-year-old mother was discharged from hospital following a stroke last year, patient information associate Faridah Osman needed a live-in caregiver to help her mother around the clock.

At the suggestion of the hospital, she looked at several commercial caregiving companies, before hiring a caregiver from Myanmar.

Madam Faridah is among those who are seeking the help of private firms for their caregiving needs. With growing demand for home-based caregiving services here, more of such players are setting up shop, joining a pool of service providers that

includes non-profits and companies well established in the nursing home sector.

The services offered cut across a wide spectrum, from professional medical assistance provided by doctors to those offering companionship and basic hygiene care, such as bathing.

Earlier this week, Singapore-based start-up Caregiver Asia launched a portal to match those seeking care services, such as at-home care, with qualified care professionals. Other newer private players include Care Visions Singapore and Active Global Specialised Caregivers.

Non-profit organisations that have been providing caregiving services for decades said they welcome the entry of private players to fill a gap in services.

Dr R Akhileswaran, HCA Hospice Care chief executive officer and medical director, said existing service providers would not be able to cope if there was an exponential increase in caregiving needs. But he cautioned that the qualifications and experience of the caregivers should be ascertained.

Mr Manmohan Singh, director of AWWA Centre for Caregivers, said the funds and talent non-profit organisations can tap are constrained by existing funding models and competition for a finite talent pool. The growing number of commercial firms is a positive development, so long as they deliver dependable and high-quality service, he added.

Growing demand

Active Global Specialised Caregivers said it receives an average of 25 to 50 calls a day, up from five to 10 calls per day about one-and-a-half years ago, while Comfort Keepers receives an average of five calls a day for their services, up from about two per day when it was established in 2006.

Hiring amid a labour crunch is a challenge, firms said. Dr Madeleine Chew, founder of MW Medical, said few locals are keen to work in home care and the challenge is compounded by the government quotas on foreign manpower.

To bring in its foreign nurses and nursing aides, Active Global Specialised Caregivers applies for Foreign Domestic Worker work permits.

Quality standards needed

Mdm Faridah, 47, found her Burmese caregiver from Active Global, but not before she interviewed a number of candidates who she felt did not meet her expectations. "They cannot do the work. (They gave us) a lot of reasons ... they cannot do this, they cannot do that," she said.

A lawyer in her 40s, who declined to be named, said her foreign-trained nursing aide, also hired from Active Global to care for her 81-year-old mother, did not appear to have as much caregiving experience as was described to her. “I think proper regulations ... (and) checking would be useful. A CV ... may not be accurate.”

Last September, the Health Ministry launched a public consultation on draft guidelines for home- and centre-based care services, as part of continuing efforts to raise the quality of care. The guidelines were targeted to be finalised at the end of last year.

To ensure a caregiver meets a client’s needs, Care Visions Singapore makes a home visit and assessment for each client, to recommend a customised care plan. Nearly all the care staff are locally registered and qualified, said its chief executive officer Loke Wai Chiong.

At MW Medical, which focuses on professional medical assistance, caregivers sit for internal examinations and external examinations by professional bodies. Dr Chew felt more oversight is needed, noting standards vary greatly across the sector.

For families seeking care services, Mr Singh said they should look out for solid referrals from people who have experienced such services. “Private providers are able to harness their networks, including the reach of social media for crowd-funding and referrals ... so caregiving families need to be wary of slick advertising and promises of services that may not be fulfilled,” he added.

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