

MATCHING GERIATRIC PATIENTS TO COMMUNITY SERVICES

Ms Chew Li Ling

With the steady decline in birth rate, improvements in health care system and standard of living, Singapore is heading into an era of a fast aging population. It is projected that in 2030, about 27% of our total population will be 60 years and above. The burden of caring for the aged will fall heavily on a smaller cohort of younger population. Moreover, the continuing trend towards nuclearisation and double income households, availability of family members as caregivers will be greatly reduced.

Unlike young adults, when elderly people fall ill and are hospitalised, they require more time and resources to help them regain their premorbid status. Whilst some will become dependent and require a full-time carer.

In attempt to meet the needs of this increasing elderly population, there has been a rapid expansion of health care and support services, with the government playing a more indirect role on policy making and funding whilst the voluntary welfare and private organizations providing the direct services.

Community Hospitals

Community hospitals provide medical and rehabilitative services for geriatric patients who require a period of convalescence to regain their functional status. This often helps to prevent premature institutionalisation of elderly people, especially whose families lack the resources to cope with their decline in functional status.

Currently, there are 4 community hospitals in Singapore :

- κ Ang Mo Kio Community Hospital
- κ St. Luke's Hospital for the Elderly
- κ St. Andrew's Community Hospital
- κ Brightvision Community Hospital (recently opened in May 2002).

Community hospitals adopt a holistic approach towards patient's care. Patients are managed by a geriatric team of doctors, nurses, therapists and medical social workers. This multidisciplinary team ensures accurate assessment and appropriate care management of geriatric patients who are usually accompanied with complex medical problems.

Day Hospitals

Day Hospitals provide somewhat similar services as a community hospital except that they are "outpatient" basis. They are situated in close proximity to the main hospital and hence have easy access to hospital facilities and medical/paramedical support.

There are 2 day hospitals in Singapore.

- κ Alexandra Geriatric Day Hospital
- κ Changi Geriatric Day Hospital.

Geriatric patients with complicated medical problems but with good rehabilitation potential will benefit from referrals to day hospitals if they are not keen to undergo inpatient rehabilitation. Family members can utilise their Medisave for partial payment of the charges. Transportation is available for patients who stay in the vicinity.

CHEW LI LING

Medical Social Worker, Ang Mo Kio Hospital

Day Rehabilitation/Care Centres

Day rehabilitation/care centres provide maintenance therapy and recreational activities for elderly. These centres are situated all over Singapore near housing estates, so that families have easy access to their services. Transportation is available upon request.

Studies have shown that frail homebound elderly who are left alone at home have high risk of falling due to their sedentary lifestyle. There is also lack of cognitive stimulation. Attending day rehabilitation/care centres can help this group of elderly maintain their physical functioning status and keep them meaningfully occupied during the day. For those who have family members as full-time carers, this arrangement also offers some respite to caregivers during the day as well.

Domiciliary Home Help Services

Home Help services aim to promote continuing care of frail elderly at home by providing medical, nursing and practical support to families. These services are usually run by a team of doctor, nurse, social worker and therapist.

Services include:

- κ Monitoring of stable chronic illness
- κ Nursing care (wound dressing, change of Ryle's tubes, urinary catheter)
- κ Carer's training
- κ Meals delivery
- κ Household cleaning
- κ Hygiene care
- κ Escort service for medical appointments
- κ Maintenance therapy (community rehabilitation programme).

Geriatric patients who are homebound and are left alone at home during the day will benefit from referral to such services.

Home Care Management Service

This is a relatively new service for the elderly who have multiple care needs. Care managers from the home care management service will assess the needs of elderly patients at home, co-ordinate and manage referrals to appropriate community based services. A fee will be charged to families based on family income.

This service provides continual support for families after elderly patients have been discharged from hospital. Families can call upon these care managers for assistance whenever difficulties arise in home care. Currently, there are 3 home care management services available in Singapore.

- κ Hua Mei Care Management Service (Western Region)
- κ Moral Care Management Service (Eastern Region)
- κ SWAMI Care Management Service (Northern Region).

Institutional Care

Institutional care is another alternative care option for families who are unable to cope with elderly patients at home due to inadequate resources or carer's burn-out.

There are generally 2 types of Nursing Homes in Singapore:

- κ *Voluntary Nursing Home*

These Homes are run by voluntary welfare organizations. Elderly patients must meet the

list of criteria for admission before applications can be made by Medical Social Workers. Families also have to undergo mean testing to determine the amount of subsidies they are entitled to from the government. Those who do not qualify for any subsidy will have to consider placing patients in Private Nursing Homes

K *Private Nursing Homes*

These Homes are run by private operators. They are profit-making and hence the charges are higher compared to the Voluntary Nursing Homes. Families can make direct application to such Homes without going through the Medical Social Workers. There are few or no criteria for admission.

Chronic Sick Unit

Elderly patients who are bedridden and require heavy nursing care, for instance, frequent bed turning, oxygen therapy, Ryle's tube feeding, intermittent suction etc., would be suitable candidates for admission to the Chronic Sick Unit for long-term care. Currently Ren Ci Hospital, St. Luke's Hospital and the newly opened Bright Vision Hospital provide institutional care for such elderly patients.

Counselling & Hotline Services

SAGE (Singapore Action Group for Elderly) Counselling Centre provides a hotline service whereby elderly people in distress can call for assistance any time. There are also Family Service Centres located near housing estates which offer similar services.

Conclusion

Community support services aim to alleviate the carers' stress and hence prevent early institutionalization of the elderly. Unfortunately, some of these organisations have yet to attune their services to the needs of the families. Many families still find support services inaccessible as they are not sensitive to the specific needs of the elderly. For instance, elderly patients who are semi-ambulant/wheelchair bound and staying on a non-lift landing will have difficulties getting to a day care centre. In addition, the differences in charges and quality of services are issues that need to be looked into as well.

In attempt to address such service gaps, the National Council of Social Services, Elderly Service Section, is constantly gathering feedback to service providers with the view to fine-tune current community based services.

Questions

1. Respite care is available at all the above except:
 - a. nursing homes
 - b. sheltered housing
 - c. community hospitals
 - d. chronic sick units.
2. An elderly patient with a recent stroke can undergo rehabilitation at the following except:
 - a. day care center
 - b. social activity center
 - c. community hospital
 - d. home
 - e. nursing home.
3. Carer's training is provided by the following except:
 - a. nursing homes
 - b. community hospitals
 - c. home care groups
 - d. acute hospitals
 - e. day rehabilitation centers
 - f. all of the above.