

Ageing Singapore needs to look into growing caregiving challenges

The news report, “Significant share of caregivers to elderly face health woes themselves: Duke-NUS study” (June 11), highlighted that many caregivers of the elderly also have their own health problems.

The average age of caregivers is about 62. It is estimated that by 2030, about 25 per cent of Singaporeans will be 65 years and older.

The problems facing the elderly are not just medical ones. Many of them are asset-rich but cash-poor, and cannot always expect the younger members of their family to take care of them.

As a general practitioner, I encounter older patients with these problems regularly. They are grateful for subsidies in healthcare, but what they fear most is to be afflicted with chronic diseases like dementia, Parkinson’s or stroke that leave them unable to cope physically and mentally, with conditions such as depression and anxiety, often accompanied by insomnia.

A person afflicted with such ailments would need not only full-time caregivers, but also the financial means to afford long-term treatment. When the caregivers themselves, who are often spouses and close relatives, suffer from health issues, the problem is compounded.

When patients have to attend many outpatient specialist sessions, that may mean half a day or so for each check-up spent by the patients and their caregivers. Multiply this with the need to see different specialists for different illnesses, and the magnitude of the problem becomes clear.

Some patients with dementia, mental illnesses and other chronic problems with severe incapacity may need to be sent to institutions for more professional care.

But there is a long waiting list

for institutional care, and a long process to ensure patients are entitled to certain subsidies for admissions.

More medical personnel, such as psychiatrists, social workers and counsellors, are needed. Also needed are more spaces in institutions, so that there are enough such facilities to cater to the increasing demand for institutional care.

The medical problems of the elderly are tied to social and financial issues, at home and with the extended family. I have had elderly patients who were taken to the clinic and left to go home on their own – some did not have enough money to pay for their medication or for transport home.

I can thus understand why some seniors are not keen to go to the hospital; they know that money will need to be spent, and that the inconvenience caused may aggravate an already strained relationship at home.

With its rapidly ageing population, I am concerned that Singapore is not adequately prepared for these growing challenges.

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An elderly person afflicted with chronic diseases would need not only full-time caregivers, but also the financial means to afford long-term treatment, says the writer. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY