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A study conducted by Duke-NUS Medical School found that almost 42 per cent of spousal caregivers receive no family support and have a higher-than-average burden of chronic diseases. This underscores a critical gap in caring for Singapore's rapidly ageing society: When a senior falls, the caregiver, often an elderly spouse, is suddenly placed in a physically and emotionally demanding role.
ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Falling through the cracks: A senior's slip can upend two lives

Many seniors have only their spouses for support. If one of them suffers a fall, it can precipitate a caregiving crisis that we need to address.

Goh Jing Wen and Tan Kok Yang

It is the sort of accident that could become all too common in Singapore. The irony is that the 78-year-old woman had been trying to guard against it.

She had started attending a falls prevention programme when she slipped and fell outside her bathroom. Chiao fractured her hip, remained using a wheelchair for weeks and her daily routines crashed to a halt.

Among other things, she and her husband, 89-year-old Yee, stopped attending the programme. In his case, it was because he needed to be around her and care for her while she recovered from her injury. This almost led to a second accident.

One day, when he was rushing home to be with his wife, Yee lost control of his bicycle and fell.

Luckily, he suffered only minor bruises. Otherwise, with no children and barely any family support, who would have cared for this elderly couple?

A TROUBLING TRUTH

This story is not unique. When injury or illness strikes, many ageing Singaporeans often have only their spouse to turn to for support. A study conducted by Duke-NUS Medical School found that almost 42 per cent of spousal caregivers receive no family support and have a higher-than-average burden of chronic diseases.

This underscores a critical and often-overlooked gap in caring for Singapore's rapidly ageing society: When a senior falls, the caregiver, often an elderly spouse, is suddenly placed in a physically and emotionally demanding role.

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Falls are not minor incidents – they are among the most serious health threats facing older Singaporeans. They are the leading cause of injury-related hospitalisations, accounting for more than 85 per cent of geriatric trauma cases treated in emergency departments. Injuries range from fractures and joint damage to brain trauma and internal bleeding.

A fall is often seen as a single medical event. However, its impact goes beyond broken bones. It can trigger fear, anxiety and social isolation for the senior. The effects extend to elderly caregivers, who may also experience emotional stress, financial strain and social isolation.

BRIDGING THE CARE GAP

Singapore tries to keep its seniors physically active, socially engaged and independent within their own homes and neighbourhoods. It has programmes to reduce the risk of injury and disease.

For frail seniors who need help, the Caregivers Training Grant provides an annual subsidy for approved courses, allowing caregivers to learn essential skills such as safe patient handling, bathing, transferring, and managing dementia.

In addition, the EASE (Enhancement for Active Seniors) programme offers subsidies for home modifications, such as grab bars and slip-resistant treatments for bathroom and toilet flooring, to improve safety and mobility at home.

While these initiatives are useful, they may not fully address the needs of older couples living alone. When one of them suffers a fall, for example, both are placed at heightened risk, turning a single incident into a dual vulnerability.

This reveals an immediate caregiving gap. There is limited support for the patient and the caregiver during the recovery period. Vulnerable households need short-term caregiving assistance after a fall and help with home-based rehabilitation. It is also important to remember that supporting caregivers is not a secondary concern but is essential to preventing another fall from either individual. We also need to reduce the caregiving burden placed on these vulnerable seniors and preserve their dignity and independence.

As Singapore continues to age, stories like that of Chiao and Yee will become increasingly common. Given our plunging total fertility rate, every 100 residents today will have on average only 44 children and 19 grandchildren, leaving many older adults to rely on a few or no family members for their care needs in the near future.

This means that, in old age, the well-being of one senior is often closely related to the well-being of their spouse and family. And when a senior suffers a fall, it is not just a personal accident but a crisis that can destabilise households and affect the broader community.

Such seniors need urgent support. Policies, programmes and communities must work together to ensure that when one falls, the other does not fall next.

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