



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

ASSISI HOSPICE

Solace for the dying and their families

For those afflicted with a terminal disease, the last stages of life are a trying time for themselves and their caregivers. The staff and volunteers at Assisi Hospice help people cope with the emotional and physical challenges as death approaches.

ANGELA Kwek did not know what to do when the hospital staff told her to take her sick mother home.

Her mother was seriously ill with breast and brain cancer, and it was too much for Ms Kwek to handle alone. Her home was too small for a hospital bed and she was not strong enough to lift her mother to change her clothes or take her to the bathroom.

Thankfully, the hospital referred her to the Assisi Hospice, where her mother spent her last days in comfort, well cared for.

It has been 12 years since her mother passed away, but Ms Kwek is still a regular visitor at the hospice, where she is a volunteer. "You learn a lot as a volunteer," she said. "You learn how to love people, and to care for people."

Assisi Hospice, a member organisation of Caritas Singapore, provides care for those with life-threatening illnesses, offering medical, emotional and psychological support to patients. As most of those admitted are terminally ill, its team helps to prepare families and patients to face the process of dying.

The nuns from the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood order, who started Mount Alvernia Hospital, established Assisi Hospice in 1969 for chronically ill patients. Since moving into its present premises in 1993, Assisi Hospice has focused on hospice care for the terminally ill.

Hospice administrator Ms Irene Chan said: "The end-of-life care for a person may be a physically and psychosocially trying time, so Assisi Hospice hopes to provide the care and support both the patient and family need, so as to maintain the quality of life."

It provides three main services: a day centre, home care and in-patient care. With a team of 180 volunteers, it cared for



Patients warm up at the start of an exercise session conducted by a volunteer teacher.

"We provide care for not just the patient, but for the family too. We hope to provide compassionate care that dignifies the life of people."

— Ms Irene Chan, hospice administrator.

1,138 patients and their family members last year.

The day centre can take 20 patients a day and is open to adults with cancer and other life-limiting illnesses who are ambulant or wheelchair-bound, but remain alert. Patients are referred by their doctors.

Physiotherapy, occupational and recreational therapies are provided, and activities such as cooking, massage and games are conducted too.

As a volunteer, Ms Kwek helps at the day centre by talking to patients and keeping them company. She is there the whole day, three days a week. She also helps to ferry day care patients to and from home.

"Usually, they keep to themselves on the first few days, refusing to speak to anyone. But after some time, they will open

up and start talking to you. Sometimes, they are afraid and nervous at being in an unfamiliar environment," she said.

Assisi Hospice also provides 24-hour home care for patients who prefer to remain at home. Nurses visit regularly on weekdays and doctors are available when medical attention is needed. The service is free of charge.

For in-patients, the hospice has two wards with 35 beds. Patients can be admitted for respite care, to give their caregivers a chance to rest, or for symptom relief, after which the patient is encouraged to return home. Patients are also admitted for terminal care.

Senior medical social worker, Ms Peh Cheng Wan, 32 counsels patients and their families, helping them come to terms with death and dying.

"At the end of their lives, everyone is equal again - rich or poor, male or female. Everyone is back on the same level and people become so vulnerable. It allows for a lot of intimate conversations to take place. I try my best to make their journey easier," she said.

Assisi Hospice has new programmes lined-up for 2010.

It has plans to expand its premises to meet the increasing needs of patients who need end-of-life care. The hospice receives more referrals from hospitals than it can cope with.

It also wants to extend the end-of-life rehabilitation programme for patients. This will help the patients remain active for as long as possible, slowing down the rate of physical deterioration and even helping them to regain part of their physical health.

Ms Chan recalled an elderly woman who stayed well right up to the week before she died, moving about freely and not needing diapers.

"It is our responsibility to help patients retain that dignity for as long as possible," she said.

Other new programmes include working with the Lien Centre for Palliative Care on the Singapore Community Bereavement Project funded by the TOTE Board. It aims to train social workers to provide bereavement support, which is sorely lacking in Singapore. It also plans to develop a training programme for counsellors in bereavement services.

"We want them to know that even at the end of life, it's

A photo, a steamboat party, and a ride on the Flyer

THE cancer struck fast and with no warning. Last November, taxi driver Chia Lee Huat, 54, was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Within months, his condition deteriorated and he is now in the terminal stages of the disease.

The sudden and late diagnosis has been distressing for him and his family. In March, Tan Tock Seng Hospital referred him to Assisi Hospice where medical staff, social workers and volunteers have swung into action to manage his symptoms, and provide him and his family members emotional support and care.

"The volunteers here come by my room and talk to me all the time. It can get quite boring sometimes, so I really enjoy their company," he said.

The Assisi team organised a studio photography shoot of Mr Chia, his wife and three children before they had a steamboat dinner at a place that held special meaning for the family.

Mr Chia is very appreciative of the support Assisi Hospice has given him, and hopes he will be able to manage one more outing with his family to the Singapore Flyer, as he has never been on it before.

"I am really thankful for their help. When the volunteers and social workers come to talk to me, I'm very happy. It makes me feel a lot better to have someone to talk to," he said.

Who's Who

Patron: Ms Ho Ching
Chairman: Mr Ronny Tan
Chief Executive Officer:
Mr Khoo Chow Huat
Medical Director: Dr Tan Yew Seng
Administrator: Ms Irene Chan

How you can help

Make a donation online via www.sggives.org or send a cheque payable to Assisi Hospice to the address below.

Sign up as a volunteer.

Contact Assisi Hospice at:

Assisi Hospice
820 Thomson Road
Singapore 574623

Tel: 6347 6446

Email: assisi@assisihospice.org.sg

Website: <http://www.assisihospice.org.sg>

possible for people to cherish what they have and to carry on achieving life goals. A lot can be done during this period," said Ms Chan. "The focus is on life, not death."