



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

The elderly have a right to flourish

IT IS the duty of each of us in Church, society and government to ensure that all of us are able to age with security and dignity, free from exploitation and physical and mental abuse. Life is precious and sacred, from conception to the moment of death. The Church today calls on everyone to respect the dignity of elderly persons and to accord them their fundamental rights.

Honouring older people involves a threefold duty: welcoming them, helping them and making good use of their qualities. There must be a growing conviction that a fully human civilisation shows respect and love for the elderly so that despite their diminishing strength they feel a vital part of society (Pope John Paul II's Letter to the Elderly,

paragraph 12).

We need to make the elderly, especially the ill and infirm, feel welcome in our community. This means helping them to continue with life as they age and as their health and mind deteriorate. We need to recognise that there is much we can learn from the wisdom and experience of the elderly.

The elderly should be able to continue to participate in society and Church as citizens and parishioners with full rights. They should not be denied participation because they cannot hear as well or move as quickly as they used to.

They should also not be denied medical attention because they are "too old to benefit". Their symptoms of distress, pain or disability should not be dismissed as "a normal part of ageing".

This is the first of a series of articles on the 'Dignity of the Elderly', an ongoing project of Caritas Singapore. Today we consider the rights of the elderly and the social principles that can guide our planning and caregiving.

We need to respect their right to privacy and to be treated with dignity. Being old does not mean becoming stupid or invisible.

Caregivers and nurses who help the elderly with daily life activities that we all take for granted - for

example, walking, eating, washing or clearing the bowels - should do so with utmost respect for the person's sensitivity and feeling of vulnerability.

Awkward and intimate questions should not be asked in a loud voice. Neither should the condition or behaviour of an elderly person be discussed loudly in front of them as though they were not present.

Those who minister to the elderly need to apply the principle of subsidiarity by finding ways to enable the elderly to use their charisms to continue to contribute to family, society and Church. It is not enough to simply provide for their material needs and treat them as objects of our generosity.

And we should be aware of elder abuse too. Elder abuse is any

action or inaction perpetuated by a person in a position of trust who jeopardises the health or well-being of an elderly person by inflicting physical, emotional, psychological or sexual harm on him or her. It also includes financial exploitation, abandonment, neglect and medication abuse by caregivers.

As we live in a society that values youth and independence above many things, we need to remember to adhere to the gospel value of interdependence by recognising that there is much we can learn from the elderly.

As St Paul said, the power of God can be revealed in old age, even if it is characterised by physical impediments and difficulties (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

Catholic nurses make their mark

WHEN Mrs Theresa Cheong visited a village in Cambodia last year on a mission trip organised by the Catholic Nurses Guild (CNG), she found more than 200 villagers waiting for her team to arrive.

News had spread of the medical team's arrival and the turnout was greater than expected.

Mrs Cheong, the President of CNG, recalled what happened when the team handed out Panadol tablets: "To them, this medication is very precious. I saw some of them split the tablet into quarters so that it would last longer. Without this medication, they would have to walk a long way to see the doctor for a fever."

She has been to Cambodia twice on mission trips. Last year, she and her team of five nurses went to Batam too. On these trips they provide healthcare screening and treatments for minor ailments such as cough, cold and deworming. They also teach villagers about hand hygiene, dental care and play therapy. This year, the CNG will go to Nepal in September on another mission trip.

Mrs Cheong said: "We do a lot of health education and health checks for the villagers. We teach them about malaria, tuberculosis and family planning. It's very enriching and meaningful to be able to impart healthcare knowledge to the villagers to try to improve their living conditions."

The CNG was established in 1956 as an initiative of the Interna-

tional Catholic Committee of Nurses and Medico-Social Assistants (CICIAMS). The CNG plays an important role in the healthcare of the Catholic community.

On top of the mission trips, the CNG organises pastoral care workshops for the parishes. During these workshops, parishioners are taught how to care for the mentally and terminally ill. The society has about 50 volunteers who also provide medical and first aid coverage for church events, masses for the sick and feast day celebrations.

The society also works with the Archdiocesan Commission of Pastoral Care for Migrants and Itinerant Workers (ACMI) to teach foreign maids basic caregiving.

CNG also helps run the free clinic in the Church of the Risen Christ in Toa Payoh every fortnight.

This year, the 10th Asian Regional Congress of CICIAMS will be held in Singapore from 3 to 5 September. With the theme of "Embracing Holistic Healthcare through Practice, Research and Education", the conference aims to provide an opportunity for the Asian Catholic nursing community to present and exchange ideas.

"We hope to give them a platform to comment on issues to do with healthcare, nursing practices, ethical issues and research, and challenges that accompany efforts to integrate spirituality into healthcare," said Mrs Cheong.



Nurses from the Catholic Nurses Guild help to teach foreign maids the basics of caregiving, to improve their skills in looking after the sick or elderly.



Singapore nurses visit countries in the region to provide healthcare screening and treatments. In this picture, CNG volunteers on an outreach mission to Pattaya are seen with teenage orphans.



Catholic Nurses' Guild of Singapore

Who's Who

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