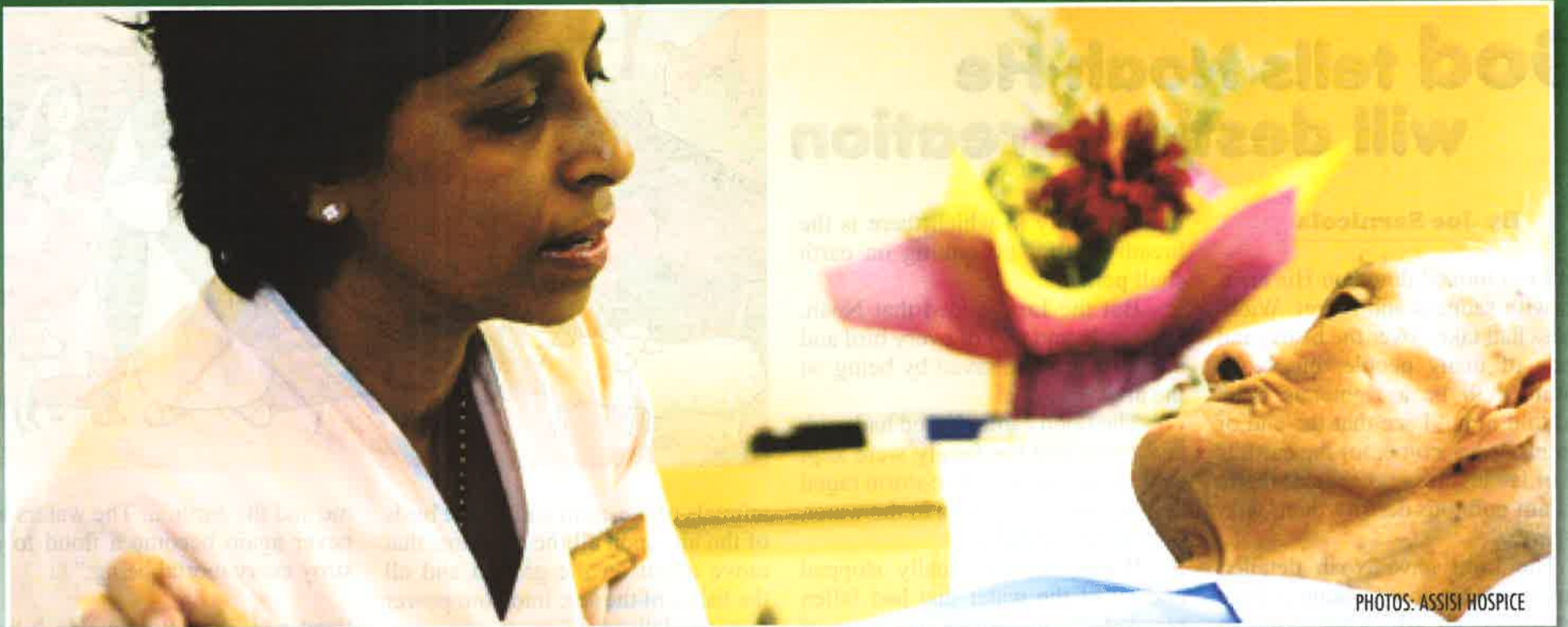




# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL



PHOTOS: ASSISI HOSPICE

Inpatients at Assisi Hospice stay an average of 22 days before they pass away. That is very little time to manage the symptoms and the needs of the patient and family, which include their spiritual, emotional and psychosocial needs.

## Compassion and care on the final journey

**I**T is not only the dying who receive care at Assisi Hospice in Thomson Road. The hospice, located within the premises of Mount Alvernia Hospital, extends its holistic care to the families of the terminally ill as well.

Executive director Irene Chan describes a young mother's dying wish for her child to pass the Primary School Leaving Examination. The youngster failed the exams the year the mother died. Assisi Hospice matched the funds from a donor to enable the child to have private tuition and resit the PSLE the following year. It paid off. In a thank-you note to the anonymous donor, the child wrote: "I was so happy to put my results in front of my mother's photo."

The hospice movement worldwide provides palliative care for the terminally ill. Inpatients at Assisi Hospice, a Catholic charity and member organisation of Caritas Singapore, stay an average of 22 days before they pass away, said Ms Chan. That is very little time to manage the symptoms and the needs of the patient and family, which include their spiritual, emotional and psychosocial needs. "The unit of care is really the patient and the family," she said.

Ms Chan explained the ethos of Assisi Hospice in caring for the dying and their families. Its values include service modelled on Christ the Servant King and humility. "We humbly learn from the patients how they would like to be cared for at the end of their life," she said. The hospice values also comprise joyfulness in being able to serve, and reverence for life: How do you believe that life is sacred when you see it in such a physically broken form?

Assisi Hospice welcomes people of all faiths, ages, races or financial situations, accepting patients who are unable to pay. There are 36 beds, but its integrated care includes Day Care and Home Care

*At Assisi Hospice, staff and volunteers help the terminally ill and their family members to face death gently*

services for non-residents. More than 1,000 adults and children are cared for. The hospice services are made possible by the support and donations of the Catholic community in Singapore.

Dr Ong Yew Jin, a specialist in palliative care at the hospice, said that alleviating the physical symptoms, pain and discomfort of the dying is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. "I see my role as a physician primarily to make sure that the patients' physical needs are so well cared for, that they can maximise or optimise their function to do what they want to."

He emphasised that it is a team effort by the doctors, nurses, therapists, social workers, counsellors, pastoral staff and other workers.

Dr Ong described how a woman with Motor Neuron disease, a neurological disease that leads to progressive paralysis, was helped to be comfortable enough to go out with her friends. But this was not the only area in which she received support.

"She didn't want her daughter to see her in this condition. Her daughter had not seen her mother for several months as her condition deteriorated," recalled Dr Ong. With support, both mother and daughter were able to journey together to the end.

The activities that bring satisfaction to some patients in their final days would probably be taken for granted by others. They might want to go out for a simple meal, or go to the toilet rather than use adult diapers, or have a good shower, or enjoy a pain-free, good night's rest, said Dr Ong.

One young man, Dr Ong recounted, wanted to get married before he died, even

though some people he knew wanted him to focus on staying alive instead. The man died at home, where he wanted to be, three months after his wedding.

Hospice care includes supporting patients in their spiritual and religious desires, and in how they wish to spend their remaining physical, emotional and spiritual energies. A Muslim resident might wish to have an imam come to pray with him, just as a Catholic might request a priest to comfort them, said Mr Andrew Joseph Ng, a Clinical Pastoral Care counsellor at the hospice.

Asked what he has learnt from his patients, Dr Ong said: "Death is very normal, it's part of life. This is life, as far as the sun rises, the sun sets. The issue is how we make use of the time between the rising and the setting of the sun."

"What matters most is relationships. It

might be helpful for us to really look after our relationships. That will help us to accept death much better when it comes."

The Catholic emphasis on the dignity of the human person is observed at the hospice, where one is accompanied on the final journey, whether it takes weeks, days or only hours.

Describing an elderly man who died within hours of being brought to Assisi Hospice, Dr Ong said: "Even for those few hours, we got him cleaned up, gave him medicine that made him comfortable; he had been fidgeting with pain and discomfort and we got our volunteers to arrange his funeral."

The man's siblings had passed away, his in-laws were in Malaysia and he had no one else in Singapore. The hospice did what it could for him, with respect and compassion.



### HOW YOU CAN HELP

**Donate:** Assisi Hospice needs your help with sponsorships or donations that will enable it to raise the S\$4 million required every year to support a current operating cost of S\$6 million. The difference comes from patient subsidies from the Ministry of Health and what families can afford.

**Volunteer:** Volunteers help the hospice deliver compassionate care and comfort to patients. Volunteering can be in the form of direct patient care (feeding, bathing, and providing companionship); lending your professional talents (art, music, massage or hairstyling, for example); or helping with fundraising events like the coming Charity Fun Day on June 17.

Be a part of Assisi Hospice's mission of care for the critically ill, the dying and the poor. For more information, visit its website at [www.assisihospice.org.sg](http://www.assisihospice.org.sg) or contact Joyce Ong at 6347 6443 or email: [joyce\\_ong\\_sb@assisihospice.org.sg](mailto:joyce_ong_sb@assisihospice.org.sg).