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More S'pore elderly being struck by disabilities

A heavy burden on caregivers and on the health care system, say NUS researchers**By Radha Basu**

SINGAPOREANS may be living longer, but they are not necessarily living well.

More elderly folk here are needing help to carry out even everyday tasks such as getting around, bathing or eating, a study by the National University of Singapore (NUS) has found.

Twenty years ago, 14 per cent of those aged 75 and up could not perform such tasks; now, a quarter cannot do so, the study published earlier this year found.

Researchers found such 'functional disability' also on the rise in those a decade younger, that is, those above 65 years old, but the slide in this group is much slower.

This is in sharp contrast to developed countries such as the United States, where disability among the elderly has come down, even as their populations have also greyed rapidly.

The Singapore study, done by NUS' Department of Psychological Medicine and published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, involved quizzing almost 1,100 seniors on their ability to independently do 10 routine tasks, including eating, bathing, bladder control, going to the toilet, walking around at home and climbing stairs.

Lead researcher Ng Tze Pin warned that the numbers would pose an 'increasingly heavy burden on caregivers and on the health care and social support services in the country'.

The study found arthritis and cognitive impairment - or the failure to understand simple tasks - to be the most common reasons for disability. About a quarter of those in the study suffered either of these two conditions.

Diabetes and stroke also emerged as two other causes of impairment in the old.

Preventing the diseases that cause disabilities - or at least managing them better - is the best way to alleviate the problem, said Associate Professor Ng.

In this, Singapore can learn from the US, where disability rates among those above 65 has been falling even in the face of a rise in the number of those suffering from chronic conditions.

Research is still being done on how this was achieved, said Prof Ng, who suggested that improving incomes and education levels among the elderly and better treatment of chronic conditions could account for the trend.

His boss, Prof Kua Ee Heok, believes that the key to better treatment lies in training general physicians to detect early-warning signs of chronic conditions.

He noted that the Health Ministry's recent moves to improve the management of chronic diseases would mean better prospects for a healthier life for the elderly in the future.

But these moves may have come too late for some of those already above 75 and saddled with disabilities because their chronic conditions were left unchecked or untreated for too long, said Prof Kua.

Madam Hadijah Hassan, 79, knows too well the folly of not going for regular check-ups.

'I always thought I was fine and had no idea this would happen,' she said in Malay, referring to the severe stroke which struck her in 2002.

The woman who never went for regular medical check-ups is now wheelchair-bound and unable to perform most household tasks.

To help people like her, Singapore needs to invest more heavily in social support services for the elderly, said ageing expert Mary Ann Tsao.

These would include home-help services which provide meals, housekeeping and medical assistance, and day-care centres for the old.

Many such services are available, but each organisation is reaching out to a few hundred people at best, said Dr Tsao, who heads the charitable Tsao Foundation which runs programmes for the elderly.

'We need more money to build up these services - not only in terms of quality but also to try and extend their reach,' she said.

'We are clearly not treating disability in the elderly as well as we should.'

The medical director of Ren Ci-Code 4 Home Care Tham Weng Yew agrees that being thin on resources is hampering the ability of social service networks to treat the disabled elderly where they would be most comfortable - at home.

Since his charity subsidises the patients it serves, it can only take on about 70 new cases a year.

He said: 'If we had a system like the US where insurance can pay for such services, the elderly - particularly the disabled ones - would definitely stand to gain.'

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