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END-OF-LIFE CARE

Putting the human touch into hospices

Once a week, Japanese volunteers treat patients with terminal illnesses to massages

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SINGAPORE – A calming melody filled the room. Nestled comfortably in plush armchairs, a group of elderly people were enjoying a relaxing foot massage. Contented smiles flitted across their faces as the masseuses deftly kneaded their tired feet.

This scene took place not at a massage parlour but at the Day Centre of Assisi Hospice. Once a week, the hospice's patients are treated to foot massages by volunteers from the Japanese Association, Singapore (JAS).

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ing with one another, but words do not matter when a loving touch is present, quipped Ms Keiko Itani, a 51-year-old Japanese homemaker who has been massaging the feet of patients at the hospice for over a decade.

“Of course, there will be some patients who are very demanding and say things like they don't like the creams we use but it's okay, I just smile or laugh,” said Ms Chrystine Gan, 75.

Ms Yukari Aihara, 48, the group's team leader, said witnessing the brief moments of relief and comfort the massages bring to the patients helps keep the team going.

“Sometimes, they also make an effort to say arigato (thank you in Japanese) after we massage their feet. We feel happy when we see that the patients look happy,” said Ms Aihara.

The JAS team is part of a growing number of volunteers who navigate the end-of-life journey together with the patients at the hospice. Here, each patient suffers from a terminal illness, with a prognosis of six months to a year to live.

The Assisi hospice has about 570 volunteers in its database, a figure which has grown by about 20 per cent in the past three years, according to the hospice's Executive Director Irene Chan.

Made up of corporate companies and people from all walks of life, the volunteers each chip in in their own



Once a week, patients at the Day Centre of Assisi Hospice are treated to foot massages by volunteers from the Japanese Association, Singapore. PHOTO ERNEST CHUA

way. Some, like the JAS volunteers, deal directly with patients, while others may sponsor equipment, help organise events or offer cleaning and sanitisation services. There is also another group which provides financial support. Ms Chan added that about two thirds of the hospice budget are funded by the public and, without it, it “would be impossible to carry out the hospice's daily operations”.

At the Singapore Palliative Care Conference last Saturday, Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong announced plans to enhance palliative care services here. The health ministry is currently focused on expanding home care services and improving caregiver training for patients in the last phase of their lives.

Ms Chan told TODAY that volunteer support is an equally important aspect of end-of-life care.

“What the Japanese ladies here

have given the patients is the human touch. With the very ill, people sometimes forget the importance of that aspect of care,” she said.

“There is nothing we can do about death, but the important thing is to focus on the quality of life before death. What can we do while the patients are still alive? How can we put the human touch, physically and figuratively, into end-of-life care?”

Knowing that these patients each have little time left spurs the volunteers to do their best.

“We share only a short period of time with them. For that short moment, we hope to bring them some joy and smiles,” said Ms Itani.

Added Ms Aihara: “We never ever ask them about their sickness but whenever I find out that a patient has left us, I feel very sad. However, that also makes me put in even more effort in massaging another patient's feet.”

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