

Helping patients who are hard to care for

Geriatric ward nurses equipped with skills to manage dementia-related behavioural issues

Vanessa Liu

In one special ward at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the soothing sounds of Chinese oldies can be heard playing on a speaker. Behind the closed doors, nurses quietly engage patients in sorting puzzles, chatting about their childhood days, or even playing a game of mahjong.

These activities, tailored to improve the cognitive abilities of the older patients, are part of the specialised care in the Subacute Geriatric Monitoring Unit (GMU) of the hospital. The ward is meant for patients who suffer from delirium or behavioural problems associated with dementia, on top of other medical problems.

The six-bedded ward, set up in November 2017 to resolve some of

the complexities of treating patients with dementia, has housed over 80 female patients to date. These patients had been admitted for medical problems but were hard to care for in the general wards as they were uncooperative with treatment, or tended to wander.

Associate consultant at the hospital's Centre for Geriatric Medicine, Dr Lim Jun Pei, said patients with behavioural issues arising from dementia need greater engagement for effective rehabilitation, which nurses and therapists in general wards are unequipped to handle.

She said: "Nurses who do not have the technical know-how will have problems engaging and communicating with patients with behavioural issues due to dementia."

A team of 30 nurses working in the ward has been trained in inter-

vention techniques to deal with issues such as wandering, aggressive behaviour and refusal to take food or medication.

The training provides nurses with knowledge on dementia-related topics, pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatment methods and diagnostic tests for the patients, among other things.

Senior staff nurse Nurul Shakilla, 29, who has worked in the unit since it was set up, said the nurses have to take note of patients' likes and dislikes and adapt accordingly.

Referring to a patient who is prone to wandering because she wants to go home, Ms Nurul said: "Sometimes we will just walk with her, and talk to her. She likes to talk about her past. When you start talking to her she gets distracted and eventually won't even think about going home anymore."

Patients in the GMU are assessed by doctors, nurses and therapists during weekly rounds to see if they can be discharged, either to their



Research assistant Eileen Fabia Goh engaging a patient with flash cards in Tan Tock Seng Hospital's Subacute Geriatric Monitoring Unit. The ward caters to female patients admitted for other medical conditions but also suffer from dementia-related delirium and behavioural problems which make them difficult to care for. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHOONG

own homes or to community hospitals or nursing homes for further care. On average, a patient stays in the unit for two to three weeks. The GMU caters only to female pa-

tients currently. "We would like a similar Subacute GMU for male patients as well, but it's still in the planning stage," said Dr Lim.

By 2030, the number of people with dementia in Singapore is expected to more than double to 103,000.

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Teen actors role play for medical students at KKH

Felicia Choo

For doctors, learning how to communicate well with patients can be tricky – especially when the patients are teenagers.

To help prepare medical students to treat teenage patients, a programme at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) lets undergraduates practise by having conversations with young theatre actors.

In each three-hour session, students from Duke-NUS Medical School and Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine at Nanyang Technological University talk to the actors about difficult-to-broach topics such as sexual health or puberty, drug use, underage smoking and alcohol use.

They are also given communication tips and receive feedback from both the actors and KKH doctors as they go through the group exercises.

The aim of the adolescent simulated patient programme – which started in August 2016 – is to help students refine their communication skills with teenage patients, said Dr Kumudhini Rajasegaran, head of KKH's Adolescent Medicine Service.

She said: "As physicians, we have the responsibility to open discussions around these issues with our adolescent patients as they may not feel so comfortable."

To make the conversations realistic, participating actors are aged between 16 and 18, and trained by KKH doctors to act as patients, and give constructive feedback.

The actors are from Buds Theatre, a non-profit group with platforms for young theatre graduates to practise their craft. Each session has about 15 medical students and seven actors, and the students attend the session only once.

So far, about 200 medical students have participated in the programme, which is compulsory for those who do a paediatric clinical rotation at KKH.

The outcomes are encouraging. Surveys by KKH found that students improved their skills in things like conducting interviews with teenage patients, discussing doctor-patient confidentiality, establishing rapport with patients and their parents, and negotiating for time alone with patients.

Students were also more confident in discussing tricky topics such as alcohol and tobacco use, as well as sexual health.

Ms Cheryl Woo, 28, a second-year medical student, said: "It's impossible to have a conversation about sensitive issues without fumbling the first time."

"So, it was great we were able to do so in a safe environment where we could get feedback and polish our skills."

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