

Stop the Pain.

Singapore philanthropic house, Lien Foundation urges action to increase global accessibility of palliative care and pain relief drugs

Singapore 1 Feb 2012

Giving voice to the millions who die needlessly in pain each year, the Lien Foundation launched the world premiere of the documentary, "LIFE Before Death". Shot across 11 countries, the film revealed how extraordinary healthcare professionals and the sick fought a struggle against the global crisis of untreated pain. The film is part of the Foundation's Life Before Death initiative that seeks to raise public awareness on the issue of untreated pain and importance of palliative care. One of Lien Foundation's chief philanthropic missions is to improve care for the dying.

According to Human Rights Watch, tens of millions of people with prolonged life-threatening diseases around the world each year suffer needlessly from severe pain because they lack access to palliative care.¹ Essential pain relieving drugs are poorly available. The World Health Organisation (WHO) "estimates that each year tens of millions of people suffer untreated moderate to severe pain, including 5.5 million terminal cancer patients and one million patients in the last phases of HIV/AIDS."² The Foundation's Chief Executive Officer Lee Poh Wah said, "It is unacceptable that there are so many people left to helplessly face the kind of death we fear and despise – an ignominious demise marked by agony and humiliation. Society needs to resurrect the mandate, and galvanise every human effort to alleviate suffering at the end of life."

¹ Human Rights Watch, "Global State of Pain Treatment, Access to Palliative Care as A Human Right", 2011.

² "Briefing Note: Access to Controlled Medicines Program," World Health Organisation Briefing Note, February 2009, http://www.who.int/medicines/areas/quality_safety/ACMP_BrNoteGenrI_EN_Feb09.pdf (accessed August 6, 2010).

Global pain crisis

Despite the advancement of medical science, inadequate management of pain, especially pain due to cancer, continues to be a serious health problem in the world. Although the World Health Organisation (WHO) regards palliative care as an integral part of cancer care and has urged countries to improve its availability, palliative care still gets low priority and lack funding from healthcare policymakers.³

Urgent attention is needed to tackle this global pain epidemic. Despite being on the WHO's list of essential drugs, strong painkillers such as morphine are not available in more than 150 countries.⁴ Key reasons for the pain crisis can be traced in varying degrees to the following factors: The dearth of health policies in support of palliative care development and pain treatment, poor training of healthcare workers in pain recognition and treatment, fear of legal sanctions among medical professionals, harsh and restrictive drug control regulations and practices and lack of access to essential palliative care drugs. Kerala's hospice pioneer Dr M.R Rajagopal said, "There are ready and cheap solutions to alleviate the pain of suffering patients. In India, just US\$20 can provide pain relief to a patient for a month. However, due to fear and ignorance, the lack of public and medical education, and harsh laws restricting the use of narcotic drugs, less than 0.4% of the needy get oral morphine in India."

Improving care for the dying

As part of the Lien Foundation's mission to advocate and improve care for the dying, it will provide US\$100,000 to Pallium India, an organisation that has successfully pioneered the community model of hospice care in Kerala. Half of the funds would go to buying pain relief medicine for the poor and the other half to train doctors and nurses in pain treatment. The Foundation's CEO, Mr Lee observed, "Many countries, including Singapore, have a zero tolerance policy against drug abuse. Likewise, there should be zero tolerance for severe suffering caused by poor access to opioids and palliative care."

³ Ensuring Patient Access to Essential Medicines While Minimizing Harmful Use: a Revised WHO Tool to Improve National Drug Control Policy. Aaron M. Gilson, Martha A. Maurer, Karen M. Ryan, Marty Skemp-Brown, Asra Husain, and James F. Cleary

⁴ The parlous state of palliative care in the developing world by Priya Shetty, The Lancet, Volume 376, Issue 9751, pages 1453-1454, 30 October 2010

International film premiere to mark World Cancer Day

The world premiere of the “LIFE Before Death” film documentary commemorates World Cancer Day, which falls on 4 Feb 2012. Following its Singapore debut, the film will be shown in eleven languages in over 150 screenings across 30 countries. The international network of partners behind this film project includes the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), the Mayday Fund, and the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) and the Institute of Palliative Medicine at San Diego Hospice. Film director, writer and producer, Mike Hill of Moonshine Movies said, “The documentary style of ‘LIFE Before Death’ is largely observational, demonstrating the positive life-changing influence of pain control and palliative care. The story ultimately provides hope that this is one global health problem that can be solved with a little help from the audience.”

What the public can do

This global pain crisis can be mitigated with the help of ordinary people around the world. The public can support this by:

- Watching the “LIFE Before Death” short films online at www.lifebeforedeath.com
- Hosting a film screening of “LIFE Before Death” or attending any of the 150 screenings around the world
- Providing funds for pain relief medication to the sick through Pallium India, a pioneer provider of community-based hospice services in Kerala, India at www.palliumindia.org
- Supporting palliative care for all by helping their local hospices and cancer societies
- Petitioning their government to express their concerns or demand for palliative care

Global access to palliative care

The palliative care and pain treatment gap is an international crisis that needs to be addressed immediately. With heightened public awareness, there will be greater focus and action on this issue. Policy makers would be pressured to examine how better end-of-life care can be provided and to ensure access to pain relief medicine such as opioids for those in pain.

Global expansion of palliative care can alleviate this pain crisis and bring relief to the current situation. The Human Rights Watch 2011 report strongly recommended that more countries adopt and implement a strategy and plan of action for the roll out of pain treatment and palliative care services. Such a plan should identify obstacles to improved services and define the steps to eliminate them. States should also regularly measure progress made in ensuring availability and accessibility of pain relief medications. Quality end-of-life care and a dignified death free from pain are possible. If only each of us take a small step to spread this word, the pain of millions will be lessened.

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About the Lien Foundation

www.lienfoundation.org

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It seeks to enhance educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, excellence in eldercare and environmental sustainability in water and sanitation.

About the Life Before Death initiative

www.lifebeforedeath.com

The Life Before Death initiative is part of the Lien Foundation's mission to advance eldercare and advocate better care of the dying. It was first conceived in 2006 to create greater public awareness about end-of-life issues in Singapore. Since then, the Foundation has continued its drive to highlight the urgent need for improved care for the dying. It sought to de-stigmatise death and dying by spurring various 'die-logues'. It commissioned the first-ever global Quality of Death index in 2010 and reaches out to the public through the use of social media, art, films and photography.

About World Cancer Day

www.worldcancerday.org

Led by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), World Cancer Day takes place every year on 4 February. The Lien Foundation is part of UICC's more than 470 member organisations from over 120 countries. World Cancer Day is the singular initiative that unites the world in the fight against the global cancer epidemic. World Cancer Day urges the public and policy makers to reduce the burden of cancer.

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Annex A: ABOUT THE FILM

How will you die?

LIFE Before Death is a multi-award winning documentary film that asks fundamental questions underpinning our mortality.

This beautifully filmed journey takes us to eleven countries as we follow the remarkable health professionals battling the sweeping epidemic of pain that threatens to condemn one in every ten of us to an agonising and shameful death.

Through the eyes of patients and their families we discover the inherent humanity that empowers the best of us to care for those beyond cure. We uncover hard truths about the torturous experiences of patients found daily in hospitals around the world. We also discover the immense hope that comes from those health care pioneers brave enough to accompany terminal patients on their final journeys, resulting in end-of-life experiences filled with dignity, love and peace.

This is an intimate, hopeful and life-affirming story about living well and dying better, making the most of every moment of life before death.

About the Filmmakers

Mike Hill - Producer / Director / Writer

Mike Hill has written and directed the theatrically released documentary feature, *The Man Who Souled The World* (2007), and four broadcast television documentaries; *Jokes On You* (2011), *Jailbait* (2008), *AKA Girl Skater* (2002) and *Tic Tac 2 Heelflip: Australia's Skateboarding History* (2001). As well as having directed three award-winning documentaries, Mike is also an experienced television and commercial producer and interviewer, with over 20 hours of produced credits. Mike's formal training includes a Bachelor of Social Sciences (RMIT) and a Graduate Certificate in Screenwriting and Directing (AFTRS). Mike and his team at Moonshine Movies are based in Melbourne, Australia and have been producing for film, television and new media for over 10 years.

Sue Collins - Producer / Researcher

Sue's career has seen her work in a diverse range of areas within the entertainment industry, including Film and Documentary with a strong background in Theatre and Events. Since graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts with a BA in Dramatic Art Production, Sue has worked as a freelance documentary producer, producing TV specials such as *The Global Assault* (2006), and as the Production Manager on *The Man Who Souled the World* (2007). Sue has also been an Associate Producer at Melodrama Pictures and spent fourteen months working as the First Assistant Director for the stop-motion animation feature *Mary and Max* (2009). Sue has coordinated live action films, short films and animation, is a skilled researcher, and thoroughly enjoys developing new projects.

ANNEX B:

PAIN IN SINGAPORE

In Singapore, the law allows all registered doctors to prescribe controlled drugs to their patients without restriction of the total amount and the period of prescription

Despite this, there is very low opioid use in Singapore. According to statistics from the Pain & Policy Studies Group, the per capita opioid consumption in Singapore in 2009 was only 4.5241mg morphine equivalent per person, less than 10% of the global average.

I *Singapore's Opioid Consumption*

Opioid consumption per capita in 2009 (Morphine Equivalence (ME), Mg per person)

United States of America	725.1524
Australia	372.5165
United Kingdom	311.9581
Hong Kong	78.8725
Korea	37.9396
Malaysia	36.5285
Japan	19.3034
Singapore	4.5241
Global Average	59.66

**Statistics taken from Pain & Policy Studies Group, University of Wisconsin, Carbone Cancer Center, WHO Collaborating Center
<http://www.painpolicy.wisc.edu/internat/global/index.htm>*

II *Obstacles to better pain treatment*

a. **Fears and misconceptions about morphine**

People tend to associate morphine with 'death'. Patients think that when morphine is prescribed death is approaching. Some even think that morphine shortens life, which also is NOT true. Another reason patients resist using morphine is because they fear that there would be no stronger painkiller after morphine is used, and they want to keep it in reserve in case the pain gets worse.

Dr Cynthia Goh, Associate Professor at the National Cancer Centre Singapore Department of Palliative Care, remarked, "I also have patients who think that their pain will go away when the disease is cured. So they are more keen on treating their disease than treating their pain. Unfortunately, for many of these patients, the disease is not curable."

There is also the fear of addiction, as well as fear of morphine side effects, such as sleepiness or loss of ability to think clearly.

For all these reasons, patients suffer pain needlessly, despite the availability of effective medications.

b. **Lack of professional training in pain treatment**

Currently, the practice of pain management is not recognised as a medical specialty in Singapore, unlike in the United Kingdom, Australia and the U.S.

Opioids are often not prescribed on a regular basis by the average doctor in Singapore. Private practitioners rarely stock these drugs because of the stringent rules spelled out in the Misuse of Drugs Act, which ensure that doctors account for the controlled drugs they prescribe – such as morphine, pethidine and fentanyl. Such "controlled" drugs must be accounted for at every stage of their import, manufacture, storage, supply to pharmacy or clinic, prescription by the doctor

and dispensing to the patient. Even controlled drugs that are discarded have to be destroyed in the presence of a Health Ministry official. Ever mindful of the severe penalties surrounding their use, doctors may be under-prescribing strong opioids for those in pain.

The lack of emphasis on training in pain treatment for medical professionals is one key barrier to reducing pain amongst the sick in Singapore.

c. **Need for national audit on pain treatment**

The incidence of cancer has grown over the years. In 2009, it was the commonest cause of death, accounting for 29.3% of deaths in Singapore. The cancer factor, coupled with an aging population and rising incidence of chronic pain that accompanies the elderly, increase the urgency for Singapore to conduct a national audit on pain treatment. Dr Cynthia Goh said, “The recently released National Strategy for Palliative Care Report indicated that more than half of those who die will be afflicted by chronic illness. To improve our care for the dying, we need to know how effectively pain is being managed or treated. This can make a tremendous impact on not only the patients’ quality of life, but also the lives of their caregivers.”

III *Deeper penetration of palliative care leads to better pain management*

Better access to palliative care will result in pain being better managed and treated. The outlook for pain management and palliative care is a positive one for Singapore. In January 2012, the Ministry of Health announced its acceptance of the recommendations in the National Strategy for Palliative Care. Key recommendations include the delivery of palliative care in an integrated manner, the ramping up of training in palliative care for professionals and caregivers and efforts to make the public more aware of palliative care.

IV *Cancer survivors and active agers “Stop the Pain” on Orchard Road*

70 Singaporeans are turning activists to peddle syringes with a strong message in downtown Orchard Road ahead of World Cancer Day this weekend.

The motley crew comprises a group of public-spirited retirees and Singapore Cancer Society’s (SCS) cancer survivors and supporters. Their aim is to raise awareness of the global pain crisis and the urgent need for increased access to palliative care to bring pain relief. The volunteers are giving out pens that look like syringes, with a call for action to the public to “Stop the Pain”.

For retiree Mdm Susan Lye, it was a case of social bonding with a cause. “I must help out while I am active and can still walk,” she said. Referring to her group of friends who joined in the exercise, she added, “We meet up weekly for various activities like singing with seniors at YWCA. When there is a cause we believe in, we try to get involved and help.”

These good-hearted Singaporeans will fan out into the streets of the Orchard Road belt, Raffles Place financial district and Raffles City civic area. Lien Foundation’s ‘Stop The Pain’ exercise is part of its ongoing Life Before Death initiative that seeks to improve care for the dying.