

Exercise as medicine

A SPOONFUL of sugar helps the medicine go down, and a few sets of lunges may help a patient with weak knees get well.

More than 100 doctors from polyclinics, hospitals and private clinics have been trained since 2011 to dispense appropriate doses of exercise to their patients.

Another 100 fitness trainers and physiotherapists supervise patients as they do the exercises. They also plan exercises.

The patients' progress and outcomes are tracked under the Exercise Is Medicine programme started by the Changi General Hospital in 2011.

Healthcare professionals are trained to prescribe the right dose and type of physical activity to prevent and manage chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, heart disease and asthma.

"We are in the process of tracking outcomes but preliminary results of our study show that there is a general trend of more doctors prescribing exercises to their patients," Dr Ng Chung Sien, staff registrar at the Changi Sports Medicine

Centre, told The Straits Times.

The exercises could range from 150 minutes of brisk walking to a weekly one-hour session of taiji, a Chinese martial art form, for better balance.

Measurements are taken to gauge the effectiveness of the exercises. For patients who are prescribed exercises to lose weight, for instance, their weight, skin folds and waistline are measured routinely.

According to the 2010 National Health Survey, 54.1 per cent of Singaporeans do not exercise and one in four aged 40 years or above has at least one chronic disease.

Studies have shown that 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week halves the incidence of high blood pressure and diabetes and reduces the risk of heart disease by 40 per cent.

Said Dr Ng: "We are working with various partners to train more doctors locally and abroad, and one of the immediate goals is to incorporate exercise prescription as part of the medical school curriculum."

JANICE TAI



Peacehaven resident Ng Ah Yook, 89, using the Leg Press Rehab yesterday, supervised by senior care associate Doris Lim Ah Yang, 54. Six nursing homes and six eldercare centres will get pneumatic exercise machines from next month. PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Gyms for seniors to boost health

Lien Foundation spending over \$2m on machines for homes, eldercare centres

By JANICE TAI

MR TAN Cheng Hong may be 77 years old, but his exercise regime can put younger men to shame.

He does 20kg of weights on a leg-press machine and another 10kg to work out his chest muscles.

For a senior citizen who used to hesitate to go to the toilet because his arthritic knees may give way any time, his transformation is stark.

Lien Foundation believes that more elderly folk, like Mr Tan, should enjoy the health benefits that come with physical exertion.

It is partnering Finnish university Kokkola University to see how exercise can be tailored for the elderly to improve their physical and mental health.

Gyms for the elderly are the norm in eldercare centres in Finland, unlike the case here.

At a cost of \$2.2 million, the philanthropic foundation is bringing in pneumatic gym equipment for 2,000 senior citizens in six nursing homes and six eldercare centres from next month.

These machines work on an air pressure system that is gentler on the elderly users' muscles and joints. Data on their exercise performance is captured and tracked with an IT system connected to the machines so that their next set of exercises can be tweaked to suit their needs and progress.

"Many of the residents in nursing homes are there because they are frail and not sick," said chief executive of Lien Foundation Lee Poh Wah.

"Why are we confining so many of them to wheelchairs instead of exercise machines? If you are on a wheelchair for a very long time, your physical strength deteriorates very rapidly," he added.

Exercise therapist Andrew Yeo from Peacehaven nursing home said physical inactivity is a big problem among senior citizens.

"The frail elderly are often caught in the vicious circle of inactivity where, because they are afraid of falling, they don't try to exercise and this in turn makes them weaker to the point of being bed-bound," he said.

Physical inactivity is the fourth-biggest factor contributing to deaths globally, according to the World Health Organisation.

Studies done in Finland using similar pneumatic gym equipment found improvements in the walking speed of patients with multiple sclerosis, as well as the sugar levels of diabetic patients.

A small three-month pilot done in Peacehaven last year, which compared the health of 15 residents after they used the machines with that of another 11 who did not, showed favourable results.

Residents who did the exercises had fewer depressive symptoms, reduced blood pressure and greater muscle strength.

"The machines improve the image of ageing and give them back their dignity," said Sister Geraldine Tan of St Joseph's Home, a nursing home for the aged. "Instead of having improvised exercises or improvised equipment, now they are getting almost the real stuff, like in gyms such as California Fitness."

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