

Some of the 10 physiotherapists who were in Finland recently to learn how to use the elder-friendly gym machines and their software.



Elder-friendly gym machines for active ageing

Air-pressure system is gentler on muscles and joints; Lien Foundation hopes seniors will be encouraged to exercise

Janice Tai

Put the elderly into gyms, not between blankets. And to back its call, the Lien Foundation is bringing in \$2.2 million worth of high-tech gym equipment from Finland which has been specially tailored for seniors.

These machines use an air-pressure system which is gentler on muscles and joints. Weights can be increased in 100g steps instead of the usual 5kg in typical machines.

Smart cards ensure equipment settings adjust automatically to the user, and a senior's performance on the machine is tracked by software so physiotherapists can tweak individualised regimens accordingly.

Some of the pneumatic gym equipment for 2,000 senior citizens in six nursing homes and six eldercare centres arrived in April and the rest will get here next month so as to encourage active ageing habits among the old.

"Research is showing that instead of overprotecting seniors, they should be put in a gym to build up their strength to prevent incidents such as falls," said Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah.

The foundation is ensuring that staff at these homes and centres have the know-how to make full use of the machines.

A group of 10 physiotherapists were in Finland two weeks ago to be trained on how to use the machines and their software. Another

14 will be trained there next month.

It is also partnering Kokkola University in Finland, which is also grappling with an ageing population, to see how exercise can be tailored for the elderly in Singapore to improve their physical and mental health.

The new equipment has already proven to be a hit. Mr Tan Cheng Hong, 77, had been worried about going to the toilet, fearing that his arthritic knees might give way anytime. But he is now able to do 20kg presses on a leg machine and this has given him more confidence.

His fellow resident at Peacehaven nursing home also used to grapple with high blood pressure, and how it could affect her on outings. "Since using the machines, my blood pressure has stabilised," said Ms Jennifer Ng, 75, adding that she now feels more energetic.

Healthcare workers said that being able to see their progress on the machines motivates the elderly to

workout.

"Some elderly residents think that it is not their place to be in a gym and they are frightened to push themselves but that changes when they see results," said Ms May Wong, manager of therapy services at St Joseph's Home.

Ms P. Manchu, manager at Man Fut Tong nursing home, said it had been searching for such equipment for the past two years as "the usual gyms are unsuitable for the elderly, especially those with osteoporosis".

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

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

In the early 1990s, Finland was one of the first few countries to push for strength training for the

elderly. Now, over 90 per cent of its elderly who are 75 years and above are able to continue to live at home. Only 3 per cent live in long-term institutional care centres.

Such programmes also help reduce healthcare costs, said Dr Magnus Björkgren, head of the health science unit at Finland's Jyväskylä University. About 7,000 hip fractures occur in Finland each year and 90 per cent are due to falls. The cost of a hip fracture is about \$40,000 for the first year. According to research, strength and balance training can cut falls by as much as half.

"Decision makers are now seriously putting resources into preventive action to keep the elderly active instead of having just a corrective philosophy," said Dr Björkgren.

The Government in Singapore also unveiled a new \$3 billion five-year Action Plan for Successful Ageing last week.

On the cards are active ageing hubs to be built in future Housing Board developments. They will be similar to current senior activity centres but will be larger and incorporate both social programmes and rehabilitation or daycare services.

"This move will change the way people approach ageing and help to enhance the public perception of ageing," said Mr Lee. "Longevity must be coupled with a life that is worth living."

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Dr Magnus Björkgren, head of the health science unit at Finland's Jyväskylä University, on how exercise programmes can help reduce falls by as much as half among the elderly and hence lower healthcare costs. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE

Exercise helped singer turn his life around

Finnish opera singer Hannu Ilmolahti used to be quite the sight on stage, but it was not because of his deep, sonorous voice or the costume changes.

Weighing 125kg and having hurt his ankle, he had to belt out songs in the musical from a wheelchair.

After singing in more than 20 performances in a wheelchair, Mr Ilmolahti decided to get his ankle operated on by the same Finnish orthopaedic surgeon who worked on former footballer David Beckham's foot.

Six surgeries later, Mr Ilmolahti found himself in so much nerve pain that he could not walk and had to crawl to the toilet.

"I could not do anything myself, was overweight, my blood sugar and cholesterol levels were too high and my muscles were atrophic from little use," said Mr Ilmolahti, 58.

The turning point came five years ago when he mustered up the courage to join Actilife, a gym chain in Kokkola, Finland, that is catered to those aged 40 and above. "I had driven past it many times in the past but finally found the courage to go in because with an older crowd, I felt more confident and comfortable," he said.

It helped that the machines were more suited for the needs of older people and used software to track his progress.

These are the same type of exercise machines that the Lien Foundation has brought into Singapore.

After five years of training and doing away with his fast-food diet, Mr Ilmolahti has shed 45kg. He is now also a part-time instructor to 80 men aged 40 to 70 at the gym.

"I move better on stage now and my sugar and cholesterol levels are back to normal," he said.



Opera singer Hannu Ilmolahti used to perform in a wheelchair because of his health issues. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Actilife has four centres in Kokkola. Most of its 1,250 members are 40 years old and above, with the oldest being 87 years old.

"We started this concept because we realised that if there are young people around in the gym, the old people don't like to be there," said its club manager Kai Ahlraht. "The concept is catching

on and we have people in wheelchairs coming in, as well as those who can hardly walk after going through operations." Said Mr Ilmolahti: "We need to realise that it is never too late to get off the sofa because we only have now, this moment, to turn our lives around."

Janice Tai

Therapy on wheels for senior citizens

Finland's population may be similar in size to Singapore's, but its 13,000 practising physiotherapists mean it has 10 times the number here.

To help make up for the shortage here, the Lien Foundation hopes to extend the reach of therapists by putting them on "therapy" buses which will make stops at eldercare facilities. The buses will also have gym equipment that are specialised for the elderly.

"A mobile system makes sense as some senior care centres may not have the space for a gym or enough skilled manpower for therapy services," said chief executive of Lien Foundation Lee Poh Wah.

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house that does capacity-building and advocacy work in eldercare, early childhood education and water and sanitation. Apart from therapy buses, the Lien Foundation is thinking about

bringing in Finnish expertise to boost the training of the next generation of therapists.

In 15 years, Singapore will have the same demographic profile as Finland in which one in five people are 65 years old and above.

In Singapore, only Nanyang Polytechnic offers a diploma in physiotherapy. Nanyang Polytechnic graduates who wish to convert it to a degree can do so at Singapore Institute of Technology or head to overseas universities.

"My intention is to explore with tertiary institutions if we can incorporate the expertise that Finland has with regards to strength training and active ageing," said Mr Lee.

"You can have all your fanciful equipment but if you don't have the skills and right mindset and habits, you won't achieve success."

Janice Tai