

Who is looking after the elderly?

# Growing old: Should you be worried?

The crunch comes when 24-hour nursing is needed, or if you are independent but too frail to be at home

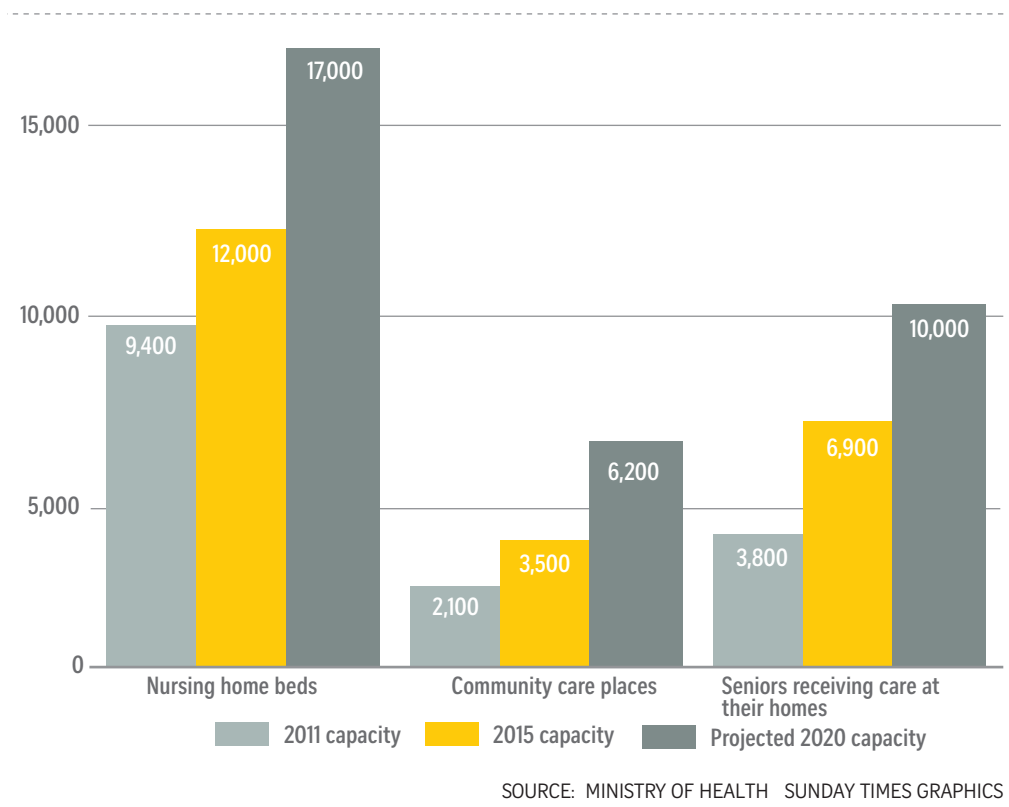
Janice Tai and Toh Yong Chuan

Home. Nursing home. Hospital and community hospital. Ageing in place. Mrs Theresa Hogan, 88, has experienced them all over the past 15 years. The widow was living with her son when she suffered a stroke that took away her ability to walk or eat. So, she was put in a nursing home. The pros: She liked the place as it was clean and its nurses took good care of her. She also enjoyed attending its exercise and flower arrangement classes. The cons: She was lonely, even

though she slept in a room with nine other people. Mrs Hogan recalls: "It was dull. The people there couldn't really communicate, and my family hardly visited. I would lie on my bed, just looking at the sky outside the window." After five years, she went to live with a grandson who managed to obtain a two-room rental flat in Whampoa. She had housekeeping services from homecare company Comfort Keepers, and the non-profit Tsao Foundation helped link her up to services in the community and monitor her well-being. Which was just as well. Over the past two years, the frail grandmother has had five falls at home, and had to be warded at Tan Tock Seng Hospital and Ren Ci Community Hospital. Then, four months ago, her grandson died of lung cancer. Mrs Hogan decided to continue living at home alone - what the Health Ministry

(MOH) terms ageing in place. Neighbours cook or buy lunch for her every day. Mrs Hogan's situation of multiple aspects of care in her senior years is not unique. By 2030, one in every three people here is projected to need some form of eldercare service. Against the current backdrop of different settings in which to grow old, Insight looks at what is being done to care for the seniors of the future, and whether those moves are fast enough to meet demand.

## Growing healthcare capacity



SOURCE: MINISTRY OF HEALTH SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

Khor said earlier this year when launching a \$3 billion Action Plan for Successful Ageing. The plan's 70 initiatives to help the elderly lead healthy and active lives include a review of the financing system for long-term care, raising the re-employment age and building more centres where seniors can get physiotherapy or take part in activities. Health Minister and chairman of the Ministerial Committee on Ageing Gan Kim Yong said when initial details of the national plan were released last year: "We need to plan

ahead to ensure that Singaporeans need not worry about getting old, but instead embrace new opportunities that come with longevity. We want Singapore to be the best place for Singaporeans to grow old in, and a model for successful ageing." Yet a recent survey of 1,000 Singaporeans, commissioned by NTUC Income and the Lien Foundation, found that eight in 10 Singaporeans are worried about growing old. Topping their worries is whether they will be able to look after themselves. Financial concerns such as running out of savings comes next.

## Ageing in place: More support for seniors living at home

The key thrust of Singapore's ageing policy is based on the view that most people want to be cared for at home or in the community. That's because they feel more comfortable in familiar settings and around people they know. And that is why the Ministry of Health (MOH) has ramped up aged care services significantly of late. Over the past five years, centre-based daycare places rose by 67 per cent, and seniors receiving care services in their homes increased by 82 per cent, says the MOH. The ministry intends to keep up this momentum. The number of daycare places, where older people go for rehabilitative and social activities, will jump from

3,500 last year to 6,200 in 2020. Likewise, the capacity to care for seniors in their homes is expected to rise by 45 per cent from the 6,900 available last year to 10,000 by 2020. Daycare centres and home-based care services - such as meal delivery, medical escorts, personal and nursing care, rehabilitation and "elder-sitting" for those with dementia - allow seniors with mild or moderate disability to still be able to age well at home. For those with more complex needs, the MOH has started piloting integrated care packages this year that bundle both home-based and centre-based care to serve needs of seniors holistically. However, the capacity to pro-

vide daycare and home-based care services remains minuscule compared with the vast, growing ranks of people turning grey. The number of elderly living alone increased from 6,000 in 1990 to 29,000 in 2011 and is estimated to reach 92,000 by 2030. Disability rates among the elderly are expected to rise, even as the number of family caregivers shrinks. To cope with heavy caregiving work, Singaporeans have been accustomed to outsourcing care to foreign domestic workers. The MOH piloted a programme last year to train domestic helpers - both in the classroom and on the job - so that they can look after seniors better. But that pool of la-

bour is dwindling, with source countries limiting supply and maids less keen to work here. To have enough manpower, the rest of the community will need to fill the gap, experts say - pointing to volunteers. Tsao Foundation, a non-profit group that specialises in ageing issues, has more than 120 trained volunteers who help regularly in counselling and organising activities. "Volunteers make a critical contribution to the care of our elderly clients," says Ms Doris Low, director of community relations at Tsao Foundation. "Volunteering is also one way in which we can support one another in an ageing society instead of seeing older people as 'others'."



Mr Goh appreciates the help he gets from occupational therapist Doreen Ang, saying she is like family to him. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

because Mr Goh is on long-term public assistance, getting \$500 a month from the Government. Last December, Touch helped Mr Goh apply for government funding to buy a motorised scooter, and sent two occupational therapists to teach him how to use it this year. "Touch Home Care director Kavin Scow says it provides these services free of charge as part of a larger government drive to help the elderly grow old where they live, instead of in nursing homes. "We recognise that the elderly want to be independent and many prefer to age at home." Volunteers from the VVO deliver daily meals to about 400 seniors

living alone. Each month, its nurses make housecalls to about 340 seniors. It also runs a daily ambulance service ferrying the elderly to hospitals for check-ups. Touch operates in Ang Mo Kio, Jurong and Toa Payoh. It plans to expand to Bukit Batok and Yishun next year, but it is feeling the heat from the manpower crunch in the sector. "Manpower challenges continue to be a concern for us, as it is important to recruit people with the right skills and heart for the work," says Mr Scow. When Insight asked if he would consider moving to a nursing home should his health deteriorate, he reports: "No. I'd rather die than go to a nursing home... I have lived in Toa Payoh for more than 40 years and in a flat for more than 20. I want to die here."

to use the motorised scooter, downplays her role, saying: "Mobility is important for seniors socially, so I helped him get around the neighbourhood safely." The 24-year-old graduated with a degree in occupational therapy last year and could have easily found work in hospitals, but she opted to work at Touch. She says: "I can make a direct impact on the seniors in a community setting." Mr Goh is thankful for the motorised scooter, saying he is no longer confined to the flat. "When Insight asked if he would consider moving to a nursing home should his health deteriorate, he reports: "No. I'd rather die than go to a nursing home... I have lived in Toa Payoh for more than 40 years and in a flat for more than 20. I want to die here."

## Nursing homes: Mega, multi-storey facilities

For the past few months, motorists driving along Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1 near Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park would have seen the new Ren Ci Nursing Home taking shape. When the 11-storey building is completed around next June, it will house up to 470 residents. Meanwhile, in Chinatown, beds and blood-pressure measuring machines have replaced desks and dusters at a former primary school. The Pearl's Hill Care Home, which officially opened in September, is Singapore's first government-run nursing home. From constructing new buildings to refurbishing old ones, Singapore is expanding the number of nursing home beds in a hurry.

Singapore has around 12,000 nursing home beds, up from 9,200 in 2010. Another 5,000 will be added by 2020, an increase of 85 per cent over 10 years. By financial year 2015, the Government was spending \$360 million on nursing homes, most of it for patient subsidies, manpower costs and construction. This is more than three times what it spent in financial year 2011. The pressure to ramp up capacity rapidly has led to two heavyweights - the Government and the National Trades Union Congress - jumping into the segment to run their own nursing homes. By next year, Kwong Wai Shih Hospital will have Singapore's largest nursing home in a new

## being built in rush to increase number of beds

12-storey hub that will see a doubling in its number of beds to 622. An 11-storey, 342-bed home in Chai Chee run by NTUC Health Co-operative and a 290-bed home in Hougang run by Thee Hua Kwan Moral Society are expected to be ready this year. Such massive projects have led observers to ask whether Singapore is churning out cookie-cutter nursing homes with soulless dormitory-style wards. Ms Loh Shu Ching, chief executive of Ren Ci Hospital, notes: "The ENHS will definitely provide safer care for the nursing homes but it's going to make things more difficult for those of us trying to turn the nursing home into a home and not a hospital."

"Dormitory living and regimented routines are the norm. Residents have little control over their daily routines and there is minimal privacy." Meanwhile, the MOH has tried to improve the quality of care in nursing homes by introducing the new Enhanced Nursing Home Standards (ENHS) as part of licensing requirements. Nursing homes were given one year - end of April this year - to comply. Ms Loh Shu Ching, chief executive of Ren Ci Hospital, notes: "The ENHS will definitely provide safer care for the nursing homes but it's going to make things more difficult for those of us trying to turn the nursing home into a home and not a hospital."



Madam Chew, who is paralysed on her right side, keeps herself busy by helping the nurses at Ren Ci nursing home. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

during this interview. Intermittently, she would check on her red bean soup or ensure that someone was feeding a certain resident. She said she is accustomed to hard work as she used to sell coffee and bread at Lau Pa Sat. Later, she also helped her father sell ice kacang at his hawkker stall in Havelock Road. Madam Chew is single and has an older sister and an estranged younger brother. Their father left them a three-room flat in Bukit Hill Swee, which they sold. "I don't like to stay alone at home as I am scared. What if I die and no one finds me even after one or two weeks?" she said in Mandarin. "Even if there are care workers who can come to my home to help, I don't think they are able to do so every day," she said. She said she did not mind sacrificing personal space and privacy.

One neighbouring resident, she pointed out, scolds her each time she passes by and another rambles on about winning the lottery. She has injected her personality into the impersonal space by pasting Hello Kitty and other cartoon stickers on the cupboard next to her bed. And she wears red and black floral blouses and trousers instead of the green pyjamas that everyone else wears. A nurse from Myanmar, who treats her "like mum", bought the outfit for her. Madam Chew, with her cheerful disposition and active lifestyle, is an exception in her ward. The other residents seem listless and stay in their beds or chairs. "I used to work so hard in the past and didn't have time to help others. So this is my form of volunteer work now," said Madam Chew.

## 'I'd rather die than go to a home'

Toh Yong Chuan

A stroke in May last year did not kill Mr Goh Keng Char, but the depression that followed almost did. Before the stroke, Mr Goh, then 77, lived alone in a one-bedroom Housing Board rental flat in Toa Payoh. His flat-mate of over 10 years had died a year earlier. When he was discharged from Tan Tock Seng Hospital after a seven-week stay, Mr Goh, a bachelor, felt lonely and helpless, having to use a wheelchair to move around. "I cannot walk... I felt I had nothing to live for," says the former water tank maintenance worker. "I took the lift to the 12th floor of the block in my wheelchair and wanted to jump down." "A Malay neighbour saw me in a daze and stopped me. He saved my life." Today, Mr Goh still cannot walk and he continues to live alone at the rental flat, but he no longer thinks about taking his life. "I have many new friends in the neighbourhood, especially the hawkers," he says. "They do not charge me." He relies on voluntary welfare organisation (VWO) Touch Home Care for food, medical care and housekeeping. Twice a day, seven days a week, volunteers from Touch deliver lunch and dinner to his flat. "The food is still warm when they arrive," says Mr Goh. A nurse visits weekly to check on his health, and staff from the VVO clean his flat. The services are free

them to shower, nurses make it a point to knock on their doors first to ask for permission to enter, so as not to intrude on their personal space and privacy. "Though some of the seniors are prone to wander, they are not kept within their 'HDB block'. Every Wednesday, they go to a factory across the road for a morning snack at the canteen. Every Friday, they walk to the Japanese school next door to say hello to the children. Hope was started in 2006 when the charity saw a need to provide care that helps relatively independent seniors living with dementia. Since then, about 100 have lived there. They pay the same rates as the nursing home residents next door, between \$2,800 and \$4,500 before subsidies of up to 75 per cent. Peachaven is not alone in having the concept of assisted living facilities.

Over at Lenton Residence, two in three of its 208 beds are in single or twin-occupancy rooms with attached toilets. The floors of the common areas are carpeted and there is free Wi-Fi. The home's chief executive Jonathan Koh says it was set up as a retirement village in 1997. "But there was no demand, so we ran it like a nursing home, taking in subsidised residents." A room does not come cheap - \$240 a day, or more than \$7,000 a month. The price includes meals, laundry and housekeeping services. Ms Khai says that living in a home-like environment has helped residents enhance their quality of life. Assessments show an average of 30 per cent increase in the sense of well-being after living there.

Janice Tai Toh Yong Chuan

## Assisted living facilities: Govt integrating services for seniors within neighbourhoods

The elderly in Singapore have hardly any other housing options besides nursing homes if they grow frail and need someone to take care of them. In countries such as the United States, Australia and Finland, about 5 per cent of the elderly population live in some form of residential aged care facility. Going by this estimate, about 50,000 seniors in Singapore will need such facilities next year. The Ministry of Health (MOH) says assisted living is a service worth studying. "Many citizens own their own homes within public housing estates. Therefore, assisted living takes the form of integrating a range of services within

Singapore. The small pockets that exist are mostly nursing homes that have set aside separate spaces for assisted living. While Singapore has 14 senior group homes, they do not count as assisted living facilities as residents do not get help with daily activities. Senior group homes are clusters of rental flats meant to let elderly folk with little or no family support live together with one another in an environment which they are familiar with. The Ministry of Health (MOH) says assisted living is a service worth studying. "Many citizens own their own homes within public housing estates. Therefore, assisted living takes the form of integrating a range of services within

care centres and rehabilitation are located. The MOH is also encouraging private operators and voluntary welfare organisations to provide assisted living services, such as housekeeping and grocery-shopping, for seniors who require assistance. A senior activity centre at a new studio apartment development in Marsiling has been offering residents nearby health and dental check-ups, and taking grocery orders. Nursing homes like Peachaven have also taken the initiative to experiment and come up with assisted living spaces for more mobile and able seniors, who still get the usual nursing home subsidies of up to 75 per cent.

## There's Hope for dementia patients

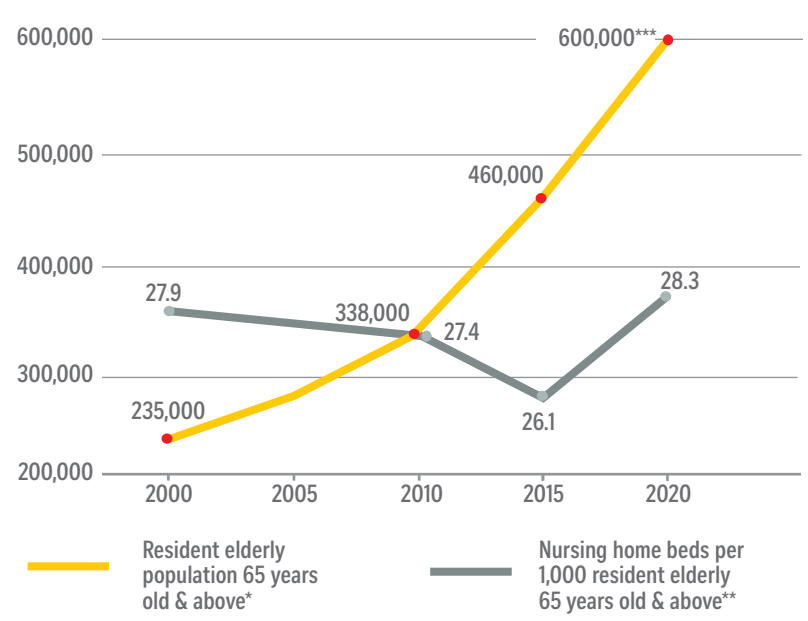
It is only 11.20am but a lunch queue has already formed at an in-house cafe along Upper Changi Road North. In the line are old folk, leaning on walking sticks, waiting patiently for their turn. They tell the servers the portions they are feeling up to that day. They then carry their plates to nearby tables and join whoever they want to dine with. And when they are done, they empty the food waste in a bin and leave the plates and utensils in separate tubs. "These elderly folk, most of whom are in their 80s and 90s, have dementia. But the people who run the assisted living facility where they live believe that getting them to do little things and make decisions for themselves will empower them. "This is not the kind of place where they just sit there and wait to be served. Giving them a say in simple things matters, because it keeps them engaged in life," says Ms Josephine Khai, senior staff nurse of Peachaven, a senior nursing home. The home is run by a charity, the Salvation Army, but these relatively independent seniors are housed next door in a separate five-storey building. Called Hope, the area where they live is modelled after an HDB block. There are about 60 senior citizens with mild to moderate dementia who live in single or four-bed rooms. In the morning, they wake up whenever they want. They are expected to get up, shower and get dressed. In contrast, at some nursing homes, it is common for residents



At Hope, the elderly residents, who have mild to moderate dementia, do not follow a regimented timetable. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

to wear the same outfit all day. "These are environmental cues and will put them in the frame of mind to get their day going," says Ms Khai. When Insight visited two weeks ago, some were in the cafe, piecing together jigsaw puzzles. Others watched television or read the newspapers. Another group went into a room to belt out the classic tunes of Taiwanese pop singer Teresa Teng. They do not need to follow a regimented timetable, but there is a list of specific activities available each day. If they prefer to rest in their rooms, they are allowed to. Before going into their rooms to deliver fresh laundry or remind

## Nursing home beds for fast-ageing Singapore



NOTE: \*Population Trends 2015, Department of Statistics Singapore. \*\*Computed based on nursing home beds data from Ministry of Health, Singapore. \*\*\*Scenarios of Future Population Growth and Change in Singapore. Demography and Family Cluster, Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. SOURCE: LIEN FOUNDATION AND KHOO CHWEE NEO FOUNDATION SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

utilisation of different options will change and so we will conduct regular reviews of our projections and adjust our development plans." For those who do not need intensive nursing care but are too frail to age in place at home, there is the option of assisted living, which is common in countries such as Australia, Britain and the US. They provide a more home-like environment, such as private rooms, for more independent seniors who need help with personal care. There are few such standalone facilities here, though the Govern-

ment says the assisted living concept can take the form of people continuing to live in their own HDB flats but having access to aged care services in their neighbourhoods. For those who do not need intensive nursing care but are too frail to age in place at home, there is the option of assisted living, which is common in countries such as Australia, Britain and the US. They provide a more home-like environment, such as private rooms, for more independent seniors who need help with personal care. There are few such standalone facilities here, though the Govern-

## LONG-TERM CARE OPTIONS NEEDED

With fewer beds than many advanced countries and relatively stronger family networks, it is no surprise that Singapore has very few older folks in nursing homes. But as families shrink in size, Singapore will need more long-term care options.



RESEARCHER RADHA BASU, in her report on the state of nursing homes in Singapore.

"We agree that we should seek to enhance the diversity of aged care options and we welcome more ideas to help our seniors age well in place," says the MOH spokesman. "We hope we can see new and exciting models emerging to meet our seniors' needs, that are uniquely Singaporean." As for Mrs Hogan, when the Sunday Times tried to visit her, she was back at a community hospital after busting her hip in yet another fall at home. She clutched a soft toy rabbit everywhere she was wheeled to. "My great-granddaughter gave it to me last month for my birthday and I also have a bear, tortoise and doll on my bed at home (in the Whampoa flat). I can't sleep here without the rabbit," she says.

For Mrs Hogan, then, the "home" to grow old in and die in has come to mean anywhere that she feels loved. jantai@sph.com.sg tohyoc@sph.com.sg