

Two more dementia friendly towns soon

Experts say such zones will allow more people with disease to remain in familiar community

Kok Xing Hui

Retiree Vivienne Lee, 73, is happy that more towns in Singapore will be designated dementia-friendly. Her husband, Mr Philip Lee, 80, was diagnosed in 2012, and she worries when he wanders around.

In dementia-friendly communities, businesses and residents are trained to recognise and help those with the illness.

“He is very active, he is never at home. He will go for walks, watch movies, meet friends. But now, he is not as good with directions and he lost his way once,” said Mrs Lee, who lives with her husband and a helper.

She is hoping her Serangoon neighbourhood will join Yishun, Hong Kah North and MacPherson, which were designated demen-

tia-friendly last year.

On Monday, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced during the Budget speech that more dementia-friendly towns will be set up. Along with help for people with mental health conditions, such efforts will cost \$160 million over five years.

The Straits Times understands that at least two more dementia-friendly communities will be set up this year. Today, one in 10 people aged 60 and above is diagnosed with dementia. It affects about 40,000 people in Singapore, and the number is expected to double by 2030.

Experts said dementia-friendly towns will allow more people with the disease to remain in the community they are familiar with, instead of being in a nursing home or day-care facility.

“It is about helping the elderly



Ms Indranee sharing a light-hearted moment with clients of the Alzheimer's Disease Association during her visit yesterday. "It is about trying to make sure that you have the things in place, so that the people who need help know where to go and can get access to it," she said of dementia support. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

with dementia lead as normal a life as possible within the community," said MacPherson MP Tin Pei Ling.

Alzheimer's Disease Association (ADA) chief executive Jason Foo said that this, in turn, helps with the cost of dementia as fewer facilities are needed. He said: "No matter how many facilities, how many day-care centres or how many nursing homes you have, you are not going to be able to cope – numbers are

just rising too fast."

During a visit to the ADA yesterday, Senior Minister of State for Finance and Law Indranee Rajah said: "It is about trying to make sure that you have the things in place, so that the people who need help know where to go and can get access to it."

Yishun – launched in January last year as a dementia-friendly town by the Lien Foundation and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) –

now boasts more than 3,800 volunteers, or dementia friends.

Another 61 businesses are also involved, including Hong Leong Finance, which sent 200 branch staff for training. The staff can now recognise signs of dementia. If an elderly person is seen withdrawing money multiple times a day, the bank can step in or contact the next of kin.

Dr Philip Yap, director of KTPH's geriatric centre, said more people

are going for evaluation of dementia. Early diagnosis and intervention can delay the deterioration.

He said increased awareness of the disease has also led to greater empathy. "Those who have been trained, they invariably say they can now empathise more with people with dementia and are more willing to lend a helping hand."

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Plans for national database of patients put on hold

Plans to develop a national database of dementia patients here have been put on the backburner as the authorities focus on building "community networks" to support those with the condition instead.

The Sunday Times reported in January last year that the Alzheimer's Disease Association (ADA), Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) and the police held talks to create a national registry.

A national database would hold patients' details so they can be easily identified and their caregivers contacted. It would be useful if, say, a patient is lost, or wrongly accused of stealing after forgetting to pay a bill.

ADA chief executive officer Jason Foo said: "We want to do it, but we need to train enough volunteers first. There is no point asking caregivers to leave details in a database if there is no one in the

community to help them."

Dr Tan Weng Mooi, chief of the community mental health division at AIC, said a registry remains a work in progress. She added: "We did quick surveys during talks... some felt worried about having such details in a registry."

Currently, the Ministry of Health has details of people diagnosed with dementia, and ADA maintains a database of those who have come to it for

help, but a national registry does not exist. The closest to this is a registry held by the Yishun North Neighbourhood Police Centre as part of the dementia-friendly community initiative launched in Yishun last year.

For a national registry to be set up, Dr Tan said the authorities need to resolve issues such as management of the database and access to it.

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