

Behind THE silver surge

Senior Correspondent Radha Basu uncovers stories of grit and grace, love and loss, strength and sacrifice, as families care for frail old folk at home



Joyce Lim, 57, works from 9am to 5pm scheduling appointments for 63 doctors who see thousands of patients daily at one of Singapore's busiest hospitals.

A slip-up on the job could mean wasted time and frayed tempers, for doctors and patients alike. At the end of her working day, she heads to her mother's Bukit Merah flat. There, she spends three hours every evening sponging, cleaning and caring for her 83-year-old mother and 66-year-old brother, who suffer from multiple illnesses.

It is past 9pm before Ms Lim, who has a grown-up daughter, begins the hour-long commute from Bukit Merah to her three-room flat in Clementi, where her own household chores need to be done. It is often past midnight by the time she gets to bed, only to wake up five hours later and start the routine all over again.

"It's what is expected of me," she says with a sigh, at her mother's flat. Her smile is tired. Her eyes, ringed in black, betray sleeplessness. And she weighs only 38kg. "They depend on me for everything."

There are an estimated 210,000 caregivers here and with the silver surge in Singapore, their numbers can only grow.

The first in-depth study by a team of researchers at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School revealed some startling facts about Singapore's caregivers.

Around half the nearly 1,200 caregivers surveyed have jobs. Yet, they spend 38 hours every week on caregiving chores, which is like holding a second job. Only half employ a maid.

And although support services – such as home medical care or adult day care – are on the rise, take-up rates are low. Only 3 per cent of those surveyed use day rehabilitation services, for instance, while 4.5 per cent use home medical services.

Principal investigator Angeline Chan from the Duke-NUS school says the results show that long-term care services available are not in sync with what people need.

"The operating hours may not be suitable, costs may be high and people just don't see the value for money," she says. "This needs to change." The survey also covered care recipients and another 800 pairs of potential caregivers and care recipients – people who are well today but could need help soon.

In the wake of the study results, made public in May, The Sunday Times interviewed dozens of caregivers, care recipients, eldercare experts and professionals to piece together a phenomenon that is inexorable, complex and challenging.

Living longer, not well

People are living longer than ever before but, for many, living longer does not mean living in the best of health. Families, meanwhile, are shrinking.

And to top it all, Singapore is one of the fastest-ageing societies in the world, with the proportion of people aged 65 set to surge from around 380,000 now to 900,000 by 2030.

There are no publicly available projections of caregiver numbers yet. But the latest National Health Survey – made public in November 2011 – collected caregiver data for the first time.

The Ministry of Health survey, which polled around 4,350 people, showed that 8.1 per cent of respondents aged between 18 and 69 – or potentially 210,000 people – were already providing regular care to sick or frail family members. Close to 40 per cent had been caregivers for more than a decade.

Data from both the Duke-NUS and Health Ministry surveys found that most caregivers are married, employed individuals in their 40s and 50s. Women outnumber men as caregivers and recipients. The Duke-NUS survey found that adult children make up nearly two-thirds of all caregivers.

But cold numbers tell only half the story. As The Sunday Times interviewed close to 20 families caring for ailing loved ones at home, the sheer physical and emotional exhaustion of caregivers was plain to see.

Elderly caregivers – particularly spouses – were especially vulnerable to stress. As Singapore ages, their ranks can only grow.

Retired cleaner Ang Hock Guan, 84, for instance, is sole caregiver to his wife, Madam Tan Kim Yee, 94, and her daughter from a previous marriage, Ms Soh Mong Chee, 64.

Be ready for it
"It can concern everyone at some stage of their lives... It is important for Singaporeans to learn about eldercare and caregiving early to be better prepared for the journey, should the need arise."

DR JASON CHEAH, chief executive of the Agency for Integrated Care

Both mother and daughter are nearly blind. Mr Ang cleans their two-room rental flat and does the laundry for all three of them. The couple's daughter, Ms Ang Yoke Siew, who is in her 50s, comes by to help bathe her mother once a week.

NTUC Eldercare has arranged for them to get free lunches on weekdays and provides dried food supplies to help them cook dinner. But there is no one to meet the daily care needs.

"I do what I can and try not to think of the future," Mr Ang said in Hokkien.

Not just a silver issue

Caregiving is not just a "silver issue", says Dr Jason Cheah, chief executive of the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), which was set up by the Government in 2009 to coordinate the care needs of thousands of frail old folk.

"It can concern everyone at some stage of their lives," he said. Anyone might end up a caregiver to parents, grandparents or an ailing spouse.

"It is important for Singaporeans to learn about eldercare and caregiving early to be better prepared for the journey, should the need arise."

So far, experts say, most people deal with caregiving in a crisis mode. Many adult children or spouses find themselves forced to give up their jobs to look after family members, putting their own financial future in serious jeopardy.

Take Mr Tan Chong Leng, 56, and Madam Azizah Mohamed Noor, 42, for example. Mr Tan, a former painter, stopped working late last year when his mother, Madam Ong Siew Hoong, 85, fractured her hip and lost the use of her legs after a fall.

The wizened old woman with a warm smile is fully dependent on her son for her day-to-day needs, including bathing and changing of diapers.

Sitting in their one-room rental flat in Lengkok Bahru, Mr Tan says: "She can't even walk, so it's impossible for me to leave her alone at home and work."

Madam Azizah, who lives nearby, quit her part-time job as a cleaner in a bank to look after her widowed mother, Madam Fatimah Hadit, 69, ever since the older woman collapsed suddenly one morning in May this year. She has kidney disease, diabetes and knee problems on top of a pre-existing speech impairment.

A divorced mother of four, Madam Azizah used to leave her youngest child, three-year-old Siti Nurjanah, in her mother's care while she went to work. So caregiver has turned care recipient overnight. She needs to be fed, bathed and changed and needs a wheelchair to get around.

When her mother's condition stabilised, Madam Azizah recently returned to work for two hours a day. "I just pray that nothing happens to them when I work," she says, of leaving her invalid mother and young child at home alone.

Although the poor are hardest hit, caregiving woes strike better-off families too.

Single mother Hayati Suaidi, 42, spent the entire day in hospital recently with her mother, Madam Haisah Satni, 76, who has leukaemia, before returning to her five-room Bedok flat and her father. Retired driver Suaidi Said, 80, has a slipped disc and severe mobility problems.

Madam Hayati, a diploma holder, quit her full-time job after one-too-many hospital emergencies. A former employee of Outward Bound Singapore, she recently started her own small business running outdoor activities for schools and other interested groups.

"My own company is uncharted territory for me, but at least it allows me more flexibility," she says. When she takes short business trips to Malaysia, her 15-year-old son helps tend to his grandparents.

Madam Hayati, the only child from her father's second marriage, has not yet sought any state support as she believes there are "many more who need it more". But her future is fraught with worry.

Ask about care arrangements as her parents get older and she breaks down in tears. "I just leave it to God," she says simply.

Help on the ground, meanwhile, is on the rise. According to AIC, there are more than 20 programmes that either directly or indirectly help caregivers and most were initiated in recent years.



I just pray that nothing happens to them when I work.

SINGLE MOTHER AZIZAH MOHAMED NOOR, who has no choice but to leave her three-year-old daughter with her disabled mother while she works

DAUGHTER & CAREGIVER: Divorcee Azizah Mohamed Noor, 42, had to give up her job as a part-time cleaner when her widowed mother Fatimah Hadit, 69, collapsed suddenly in May. The older woman used to look after Madam Azizah's three-year-old daughter. She had a pre-existing speech impairment and has lost control of her facial muscles, causing her mouth to open involuntarily. She cannot walk any more and needs to be fed and bathed. When her condition stabilised recently, Madam Azizah went back to work for two hours a day, leaving her disabled mother and daughter alone at home.

ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM



ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

DAUGHTER & CAREGIVER: Single mother Hayati Suaidi, 42, looks after her two ailing parents at home. Her mother Haisah Satni, 76, has leukaemia, while her father, retired driver Suaidi Said, 80, has a slipped disc and severe mobility problems. Madam Hayati, a diploma holder, quit her full-time job after several hospital emergencies and recently started her own small business which allows her to have more flexible working hours.

The trouble is, many do not know the help exists.

Touch Caregivers Support, which runs a helpline, received more than 3,000 calls last year, a 70 per cent rise since 2010, when the line was set up.

Its director Kavin Seow points out that one of the most common queries is about "elder-sitting", where someone will stay with an elderly person at home while the caregiver tends to other chores or simply needs a break.

AIC case manager Dawn Low does not offer "elder-sitting" in a nursing home but, at the last minute, the feisty old woman refused to go to what she described as a place with "rows of beds and nothing else".

Day-care centres for the elderly are not an option either as Madam Soon needs to lie down frequently, a service most such centres do not provide.

One of Ms Lim's sisters used to help, but reduced her commitment once she had to start tending to two grandchildren. The other sister, she says, is uncontactable.

Both her brothers are ill. The elder one works odd jobs and has knee problems. The second, who lives with Madam Soon, has been treated for mental illness since he was 19.

Ms Lim says she tries her best to be a filial child but her mother can be hard to please and does not care for the subsidised meals delivered to the house.

So she often ends up buying food she cuts into bite-size pieces for her mother.

"She raised five children as a single mother working as a washerwoman," says Ms Lim. "She just can't understand why I find it hard to care for just two of them."

She tried putting her mother in a nursing home but, at the last minute, the feisty old woman refused to go to what she described as a place with "rows of beds and nothing else".

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ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

HUSBAND & CAREGIVER: Retired cleaner Ang Hock Guan, 84, is the sole caregiver to his wife, Madam Tan Kim Yee, 94, and her daughter from a previous marriage, Ms Soh Mong Chee, 64. Both women are nearly blind. Mr Ang and his wife have a daughter, who comes by to help bathe her mother once a week. The family receives financial assistance and has meals delivered to their home but there is no one to help them with their daily care.



ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

SON & CAREGIVER: Painter Tan Chong Leng, 56, stopped working late last year when his mother, Madam Ong Siew Hoong, 85, fell, fractured her hip and lost the use of her legs. She is fully dependent on him for her day-to-day needs, including bathing and changing of her diapers.

THE CAREGIVERS

They come from all walks of life – parents, spouses, children, even strangers – but the trials they face are similar. Long hours often on top of a full-time job, emotional and physical strain, and all too often, financial stress as well. Yet they toil on, day after gruelling day, driven by love and family bonds.

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ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Mr Lim Fah Kiong, 68, is the sole caregiver to his 61-year-old wife, Madam Ng Mui Chuan, who suffers from dementia. For the past four years, he has helped her eat, dress, shower and go to the toilet. He also cooked, cleaned and did all the other household chores.

HUSBAND & CAREGIVER

The day he lost his soulmate to dementia

Madam Ng Mui Chuan, 61, has wandered into the kitchen in the middle of the night to turn on the gas for no reason.

She has strewn rice and oats all over the kitchen, played with her faeces and spent hours on the floor in a foetal position weeping. For no reason at all.

As her dementia advanced, so did her fits of anger and paranoia, says her husband and sole caregiver, Mr Lim Fah Kiong, 68.

When out in public, she would point at strangers and make "scolding noises". Fearful of taking her out or leaving her alone indoors, Mr Lim eventually became a prisoner in his own home.

For the past four years, he has helped his wife eat, dress, shower and go to the toilet. He also cooked, cleaned and did all the other household chores.

He could afford a maid, but chose not to have one. "I was afraid Mui Chuan might hit her. I just can't live with that fear," he says.

When her condition deteriorated late last year, his wife would keep waking him up at night. "I could sleep only one or two hours at a stretch, week after week."

Robbed of sleep for days, there were times he felt he was losing his sanity. He would often break down in tears, he says, but never in front of her.

He knew she had to be in hospital the day she assaulted him with a clothes hanger and tried to smash a fish tank.

He is on the lookout for a subsidised nursing home, but with long waiting lists for dementia patients, the former SingPost executive is bracing himself for round two of his caregiving ordeal.

The couple are childless. It was not always this way. Mr Lim and Madam Ng retired when they were in their 50s in 2005, eager to spend their golden years with love and laughter – without the stresses of work.

They had married late in life, after meeting at a training course. They planned "makan trips" around the island and to Malaysia.

"We hoped to grow old together as friends and soulmates," said Mr Lim. "Just like when we were young."

But that was not meant to be. Sitting alone in the study of his spacious and neat five-room flat, decorated with photographs and Valentine's Day cards from his wife, Mr Lim lets on that her problems began innocuously enough.

She would be forgetful and get angry for no reason. She began washing her hands obsessively, every time she saw a tap.

Once a gentle, gente woman, she grew suspicious of even her closest friends. "They

like a shirt. She went to a day-care centre for dementia patients for one year till early this year, but her frequent "crying, praying and chanting" frightened the other patients.

"I was told I must withdraw her till she gets better," he said. "But she never did."

These days, Mr Lim follows a familiar routine. Every morning, he takes a bus from his Bishan home to the Institute of Mental Health, where his wife is wardied, only to return late in the evening.

September has always been a special month for the couple. His birthday is on Sept 7 and their wedding anniversary, five days later. They have been married 25 years now.

His wife did not remember either occasion. He spent both days sitting next to her in hospital.

"There is nothing left to celebrate any more," he said.

Radha Basu

hammer me when you're not around," she would tell him.

He installed window grilles. He soon had no time to tend to his beloved plants and the ornamental fish he kept in a giant double-decker fish tank in his living room.

"My bougainvillea are dead and most of my big fish," he said sadly, as a lone golden dragon fish swam in one of the tanks.

It was only after she was referred to the National Neuroscience Institute in 2011 that she was also diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease – by then already in its moderate stage.

"With so much hype on dementia being an old person's disease, few realise that you can get it even before you hit 50," said Mr Lim.

Despite medicines, the disease continued its inexorable march. By early this year, Madam Ng could not recognise most of her friends and family. He is bracing himself for the time when she forgets him too.

She failed to recognise everyday objects too. When the phone rang, she would put the television remote control to her ear. She left wet slippers on the bed. And once, trying to dress herself, she wore a panty

PHOTO COURTESY OF MR LIM FAH KIONG
The wedding picture of Mr Lim and Madam Ng. They had married late in life, after meeting at a training course. The couple are childless.