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New master's programme set to boost palliative care in S'pore

Course will help healthcare professionals hone skills in caring for end-of-life patients

Judith Tan
Correspondent

After nurse clinician Chang Yee Yee, 41, worked at an acute hospital as a wound care nurse for 17 years, she moved to Dover Park Hospice as a palliative nurse, believing that she could apply her experience and skills in the new role.

Yet she has found that she has a lot more to learn in her role at the hospice, even though it has been three years since the move.

"Although I have a specialist diploma in palliative care, I feel I need more knowledge to take care of end-of-life patients better. At the hospice, we not only need to take care of the patients' well-being, but we also have to be mindful of the families' mental health," she said.

A new Master of Science in Holistic Palliative Care (HoPE) will help healthcare professionals like Ms Chang hone their skills in a field where many feel unprepared to provide care.

The programme is developed and delivered by the Palliative Care Centre for Excellence in Research and Education (PalC),

which is a collaboration between Nanyang Technological University's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKC Medicine), the National Healthcare Group and Dover Park Hospice.

Professor Jennifer Cleland, vice-dean of education at LKC Medicine, said: "(The course) emphasises the multidisciplinary nature of suffering and its management in different healthcare settings. The various modules also provide a strong focus on end-of-life care in an Asian context."

She added that while there are other master's programmes in palliative care offered across the globe, "there is none in Asia or with an Asian context that covers cultural, religious and familial aspects".

The programme will be taught by a multidisciplinary faculty and designed by palliative care experts "to address the unique challenges within the Singapore and Asian communities".

It also supports the growing demand for professional training and

manpower development in the palliative care landscape, which includes palliative care for terminal and end-stage chronic disease patients in hospices, at the homes of patients, and in healthcare institutions.

A 2020 survey of 2,326 healthcare professionals by the Singapore Hospice Council had shown that most healthcare professionals in Singapore feel unprepared to provide palliative care for patients with life-threatening illnesses.

It also revealed that only about four in 10 received training in palliative care either at medical school, at nursing school, or while studying social work.

Of this group, 58 per cent of doctors, 45 per cent of nurses, and 60 per cent of allied health professionals felt that more could be done to prepare them to provide end-of-life care.

The new programme offers a flexible and "stackable" course, allowing students to pursue further education while carrying on with their existing work and family

commitments.

It goes from a graduate certificate to a FlexiMasters and, finally, to a full Master of Science degree.

This suits Ms Chang, who is enrolling in the programme. "This course will allow me to attend courses at my own time and my own target," said the mother of two young children.

The graduate certificate programme focuses on basic knowledge and skills in the medical, psychosocial and practical aspects of palliative care, and takes up to two years to complete.

The FlexiMasters programme prioritises advanced knowledge and skills, and is pegged to the first three to five years of working in the palliative care sector to ensure the students can manage more complex cases with a greater level of autonomy.

The Master of Science degree is for those pursuing senior and leadership roles in palliative care. It focuses on areas such as research, economics and children, and includes 40 hours of clinical attach-

ment at Dover Park Hospice.

The Asian-centric focus also helps enhance the palliative care ecosystem across the region, where increasingly there are challenges of rapidly ageing populations and manpower development needs in palliative care.

"To meet this need, all healthcare professionals should be equipped with palliative care knowledge to ensure that patients receive appropriate care to minimise suffering and improve their quality of life," said Dr Allyn Hum, PalC's centre director and course director of HoPE.

Dover Park Hospice medical director Mervyn Koh said: "The students will be able to apply what they have learnt with hands-on experience working in different palliative care settings such as inpatient, home care and day care."

The course starts in August. Registration for the HoPE graduate certificate programme opened in January and will end in April.

juditht@sph.com.sg



Nurse clinician Chang Yee Yee (in blue) worked at an acute hospital as a wound care nurse for 17 years before moving to Dover Park Hospice as a palliative nurse. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

MORE TO LEARN

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NURSE CLINICIAN CHANG YEE YEE, who works at Dover Park Hospice and is enrolling in the Master of Science in Holistic Palliative Care programme.