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Nursing the elderly

With the establishment of a private mobile nursing agency, the elderly can now look forward to quality nursing within the family setting. **SUZANNA PILLAY** writes.

WHEN the elderly take a turn for the worse and require constant nursing care, their families are often faced with a dilemma: to look after the patient themselves or to seek the services of professional healthcare providers such as hospitals or nursing homes.

Sometimes, families elect to care for their ailing members, believing that they can provide the necessary psychological and emotional support that will expedite recovery.

"This is true to a certain degree, but without proper medical nursing know-how, it gives rise to the over-caring and under-nursing of home-bound patients. The best place for recovery is the home setting, provided appropriate and efficient nursing care is assured," said Yakob Abdul Rahman W. Scholer, founder and nursing consultant of Home Nursing Providers Sdn Bhd, a private mobile nursing agency based in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

Home Nursing Providers (www.hnp-mobilnursing.com) is Malaysia's first structured mobile medical nursing team, emphasising quality nursing within the family setting. Additionally, they conduct courses in caring for sick or ailing family members, particularly those with long-term illnesses.

"Many family members feel that patients need to be pampered, but there's nothing worse than doing everything for a patient who is able to do simple things for himself such as eating, drinking or even walking to the bathroom.

"An elderly person unlearns as quickly

as a child learns, and loses abilities as quickly as a child acquires them. Unless an elderly patient is allowed to continue doing these things, the patient becomes totally dependant on his or her family because the caring has been overdone."

To be totally reliant on their family in turn, Scholer said, would diminish the self-worth of elderly patients who are by nature prone to depression.

"If they depend on someone for everything, how can they not feel depressed and think they are a burden on everyone?"

Born and educated in Germany, Scholer is the author of *A Guide to Home Nursing*, which will be launched next month. He has been in Malaysia since 1963 and was instrumental in the establishment of Hospital Fatimah in Ipoh, Perak. He has played a prominent role in the creation of the first drug rehabilitation organisation in Perak in 1974, as well as the setting-up of the first local AIDS Hotline in 1989. In 2004, he founded Home Nursing Providers.

Scholer said the elderly have special home nursing care needs which non-professional caregivers may be unaware of or underestimate.

"The aged have a tendency to develop a whole range of medical complications, such as bedsores, embolism, pneumonia, malnutrition and dehydration."

There was, for example, the case of an elderly, homebound patient who was believed to be suffering from dementia. Instead, it was dehydration that he was suffering from.

"He was so severely dehydrated that his brain refused to function. He had

previously been drinking only one glass of water each day. I gave him one and a half jugs of water to drink, which would send a normal person to the toilet within 15 minutes.

"However this gentleman was so severely dehydrated that even after one and a half hours, he didn't need to visit the toilet because his body had absorbed all the water."

Scholer said elderly patients don't have sensations of thirst and their tastebuds are not as active as when young. "Offer them drinks they enjoy and remember to always place fluids in front of them."

Another thing that is also overlooked is proper nutrition. When it comes to food, some elderly people are fussy. They like carbohydrates such as mee-hoon or rice but they don't like vegetables and fruits which they cannot chew.

"The body, thus, becomes malnourished, having not received adequate vitamins and minerals," he said.

Inadequate nutrition can cause skin and tissue to collapse, resulting in bedsores and other complications that can worsen the condition of the patient.



Scholer helps a patient with upper body mobilisation.

Scholer said hygiene is another sensitive issue often overdone by non-professional home caregivers here.

"Most Asians, when caring for the elderly, believe in bathing them frequently with plenty of soap. However soap is very drying on the elderly, causing skin to break easily, thus making them more prone to bedsores."

Looking after an elderly patient requires a lot of commitment and patience. Eventually, there might come a time when the family is at a loss on what to do and starts seeking external support.

"Some might even think of placing the patient in a nursing home, but they should only be placed there if they cannot be managed at all in the home setting.

"A professional outsider like a nursing team that makes home visits can help ease the situation, particularly in the caring of long-term and chronic illness cases. It can help reduce the stress and anxiety of the family and the sick person, particularly when a family member has given up a job to take care of him or her."