

NUS students help seniors age well at home

Pharmacy undergrads assist residents in sorting out medication and other health issues

Samantha Boh

Each day, retired construction worker Goh Chek Eng needs to take a mind-boggling array of pills: 11 in the morning and 4½ at night, for a host of health issues ranging from high blood pressure to diabetes. He is also in charge of his 72-year-old wife's medicine for hypertension and chronic kidney disease.

It is hard enough for the 74-year-old to remember to swallow his pills, let alone recall which to take with or without food. "I get a headache trying," he said in Mandarin, adding that he used to just down them randomly when he "felt" he needed to, a practice which could be even more harmful than skipping the medication altogether.

Students from the National University of Singapore's (NUS) pharmacy department are helping people like Mr Goh make sense of their medicine. They drop in on elderly Telok Blangah residents who have been identified by social workers as struggling to manage their chronic illnesses.

The endeavour, which has been expanding steadily since it began in December 2014, complements a national effort to help older folk age well at home, and keep them out of hospi-



NUS students Joel Chan, 25, and Tan She Hui, 24, with Telok Blangah residents Goh Chek Eng, 74, and his wife, Madam Chia Cho Kheow, 72. The students helped to check the couple's medical appointment letters. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

tal. Across the island, nurses provide community health screening and home visits for at-risk seniors, while several towns, like Yishun, have been made dementia-friendly.

During their visits, the students help the old folk decipher letters from hospitals or polyclinics, and sort out their medication. Each senior is monitored for at least a year.

The Community Health Angels Mentoring Programme (Champ), formed through a collaboration between NUS and charity Montfort Care's @27 Family Service Centre,

started with nine students and today, has trained 80. Montfort Care plans to expand the programme to its Kreta Ayer and Marine Parade family service centres too.

Social worker Micki Sim said the students, armed with medical knowledge, are better placed to help with health issues. For example, in Mr Goh's case, he was able to get his vision problems rectified quickly after the student volunteer caring for him wrote a memo to an eye specialist.

"If you tell me about dark vision, I would not understand what caused it and would need to refer the client to a polyclinic, which could delay the intervention," Ms Sim said.

The students also free up social workers to focus on other areas, such as finances or depression.

Dr Yap Kai Zhen, Champ's director, said the aims of the programme include letting students apply what they have learnt to real-life situations, and for them to understand the needs of seniors better. Teaching seniors how to manage their medical conditions properly will, in turn, reduce the strain on hospitals and long-term care services.

NUS student Tan She Hui, 24, said: "As a pharmacist in the future, I will definitely check on the patient's medication compliance before making any changes to his medication because I now realise what a common problem it is."

Mr Goh has learnt to organise his medication using a plastic container with multiple pockets according to the day and the time he has to take them. The students separated the remaining stock of his medicine into two bags, labelled with the Chinese words for morning and night as he does not read English. "I don't just take them carelessly any more... The students have helped me and my wife a lot," he said.

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KNOWLEDGE GAP

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SOCIAL WORKER MICKI SIM, on how the medical knowledge the students have makes them better placed to help.

LESSON LEARNT

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MR GOH CHEK ENG, on being more careful about taking his medication.