

# *Families can't be left to bear sole brunt of caregiving burden*

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As Singapore's population ages, the number of individuals requiring assistance for daily needs is increasing. At the same time, the number of caregivers – healthy family members able to provide such care – is decreasing. Simple arithmetic tells us that it is more and more likely that any one of us will be a family caregiver.

Recently, the Singapore Government announced a Caregiver Support Action Plan to enhance support for family caregivers of older persons. This action plan is exceedingly timely.

From our research on caregiving, we know that family caregivers spend, on average, 39 hours a week on caregiving – nearly equivalent to a full-time job. Family caregivers report that their caregiving responsibilities lead to stress, less leisure time, weakening of family bonds and adverse economic impact, such as loss of income or employment. These changes translate into measurable changes in health: family caregivers, versus those not providing care, are more likely to experience depression and use more health services.

The caregiving issue is not going to go away. There are several reasons for this.

First, Singapore's high and increasing life expectancy is not matched by increased "health expectancy"; people are living longer but in poorer health, particularly women. We can expect a greater number of older persons, especially women, with care needs in the future.

Second, an increasing proportion of care recipients will have dementia and go through disturbing behavioural changes – our work has shown that family caregivers' psychological health is especially affected by such changes.

Third, while long-term care (LTC) services alleviate the stress of caregiving, we find that many people fail to take advantage of these services due to cost, perceived quality and convenience.

So, what can be done to alleviate the stress associated with caregiving? The answer lies in reducing the hours of direct care provision and alleviating the stress associated with caregiving.

One way to do this is to provide economical, high-quality and convenient LTC to care recipients, including through the use of foreign domestic workers (FDWs).

This will reduce the time that family caregivers spend on direct care provision.

Another way is to provide respite care for caregivers or find ways to share care among family members, neighbours and others in the community.

The action plan addresses some of these solutions. It proposes to

make information more readily available to caregivers through online and offline platforms. It addresses the role of FDWs by supporting their training early in their employment.

The action plan also includes expanding respite care services, such as night respite care – this will be especially beneficial for caregivers of persons with dementia.

A new means-tested home caregiving grant of \$200 a month will replace the means-tested FDW grant of \$120 a month. This means families that could not afford to hire an FDW previously can now qualify for the grant, which is a direct payment to a designated primary caregiver. It can be used to pay for LTC services or to offset loss of income due to caregiving duties.

This is a good first step. In future, this grant can be made more inclusive or even universal.

Apart from the above measures, the Government can do more to lower the financial stress of caregiving. This can be done via financial support either directly – for example, through grants – or indirectly, by tax benefits, for instance.

Going a step further, caregiver-friendly work policies, such as flexible work hours and paid care leave, can enable family caregivers to remain in or join the workforce.

While the action plan includes grants from the Ministry of Manpower to encourage employers to adopt caregiver-friendly work



Taking a multi-sector approach to caregiving can lead to a higher quality of life for caregivers and their care recipients, say the writers. ST FILE PHOTO

**Just as the Government cannot be expected to solve all the problems, the family cannot take the full brunt of the responsibility for caregiving.**

policies, it does not directly require employers to follow specific policies.

Consistent with the Singapore ethos, reducing the stress associated with caregiving cannot rely solely on government policy.

The successful implementation of these actions requires effort and coordination among family caregivers, the family, employers and the Government.

Family caregivers should be mindful of their own needs, over and above the care recipient's needs, and not hesitate to seek

support and information when needed. Family members should actively recognise and support the efforts of the primary family caregiver. We find that provision of emotional support from family members is especially helpful for family caregivers.

Just as the Government cannot be expected to solve all the problems, the family cannot take the full brunt of the responsibility for caregiving.

Family caregivers cite financial difficulties and poor work-life balance as the top contributors to stress. Employers need to make their workplaces more flexible for caregivers.

For its part, the Government can create an environment that supports family caregiving, such as recognising family caregivers through a caregiver allowance for non-working family caregivers, and encouraging employers to be more flexible towards employees who are caregivers.

Caregiving need not be seen as an ever increasing burden. With a multi-sector approach, we can achieve a higher quality of life for caregivers and their care recipients. We are all increasingly likely to be caregivers. We should not be left alone.

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