

Having attained basic care, time to aim for dignified aged care

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In 1972, I travelled to the West for the first time on a sponsored student visit to Switzerland. As I marvelled at the sights in Zurich, my eyes searched for the sight of a slum. Incredulous at finding none, I asked my host to confirm what was unimaginable to me then.

Having grown accustomed to slums in Singapore and the region, I could not conceive back then that Singapore would be in the same situation as Switzerland decades later – a country without slums.

With the Home Improvement Programmes announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the recent National Day Rally, we can certainly be assured this will remain so for a long time to come.

At the rally, Mr Lee made announcements on public housing and healthcare, many of which connote universalism – a principle applied to something that is common to all people.

Universalism already exists in Singapore's current policies on education and healthcare, where all citizens, rich or poor, enjoy access

to benefits. For instance, every child pays the same school fees at government-run schools and, similarly, every citizen is entitled to subsidised hospital wards.

Whereas universalism has been predominant in government policies on public housing, education and healthcare, we see far less of it in the social service sector, where means testing has been the norm.

Understandably, the Government has been wary of universal social care, concerned that welfarism may become too widespread. However, rising societal expectations and changing demography warrant a review on the current policies on social care which have lagged too far behind healthcare policies. In this regard, we should review the standards of social care and consider widening its eligibility, prioritising the aged and those with disabilities.

Existing thinking on social care rests on two key pillars. One key pillar is about "Many Helping Hands" with family as the first line of help apart from self help. As we face an ageing and shrinking citizen population with far fewer descendants to support the aged, this pillar is under threat.

Second, we are anchored by the

"trampoline" model that seeks to provide help for people to bounce back up. However, such help is unsuited for those with little means and no capacity to be self-supportive, let alone bounce back, such as the frail elderly. There are additional safety nets to provide for these groups but care is

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basic in such instances.

To raise the standards and eligibility of social care, we should consider enshrining a third pillar – care with dignity for every person.

How one may have felt about dignity in the past may not be the same today. I grew up in a three-room Singapore Improvement Trust flat. Back then, having a plank as a bed and a makeshift couch with wooden boxes and cushions on top was not demeaning to me as it was not uncommon to live in this basic way.

However, providing care with dignity today would require us to re-examine the basic conditions of many of our services that were sufficient for our living standards in the past.

In aged care, the Jade Circle nursing home is an example of dignified care where there are opportunities for social participation and intimacy, and freedom to make decisions. It adopts a person-centred philosophy for the dignity and autonomy of all seniors, demonstrated through anti-diaper and restraint-free policies.

Seniors, even those paying subsidised fees, are given either single or twin-sharing rooms to maintain their need for privacy till the end of life. They are also free to choose their meals. Such dignified care gives an idea of what raised standards of care look like.

UNIVERSALISM IN SOCIAL CARE

While today's interventions for seniors attempt to be comprehensive, subsidies largely support seniors who have passed the means test, primarily those in the lower strata. It is limited in catering for the middle-income group including those who have their home as an asset but are cash poor.

I believe dignified care should be made eligible to a larger group, such as the aged and those with disability who have lost the ability to "bounce back" to self-reliance.

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care should be made universal, in the same way the Pioneer Generation Package is given to all regardless of income or assets. However, exact benefits to be given can be tiered and calibrated where needed to maintain individual and family resilience as the foundation of social care. So for example, seniors needing long-term institutional care should be housed in single or twin-bedded rooms within a homely environment. The amount they pay may then be tiered according to income and assets.

As Singapore seeks to provide better social care for its people, it is worth remembering that this effort is not the Government's alone but requires buy-in from the entire community, including the private sector.

Companies can help build dignity and independence by committing themselves to inclusive hiring, offering jobs with fair remuneration for seniors, and persons with disabilities and mental health issues. In South Korea, businesses are required to employ a certain percentage of employees with disabilities or pay higher taxes. Uniqlo sets out to hire at least one person with disability per store. At two organisations I have been involved in, the Singapore Exchange and National Council of Social Service, inclusive hiring practices for the disadvantaged and mental health initiatives have been adopted.

Having done well in basic care, we should now advance our care to a dignified one with broader inclusion, reflective of our nation's progress. Having achieved considerable material success, we must strive to become a more engaged and caring society, one where we are there for one another at one's beginning and end.

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