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## Editorial

### The View at 80

E H Kua

In Singapore today, to be 65 or even 75 is no longer a phenomenon. In the 1980 census, the total number of octogenarians was about 12,500 and this had risen to 27,000 in 1990. There are numerous studies on people who are 60 or 65 years, but there is a dearth of data on the octogenarians. With a changing demographic landscape, it is imperative that gerontological research should focus on the older elderly.

The Centre for the Study of Ageing (CENSA), the research arm of the Singapore Action Group of Elders, embarked on a study of people, aged 80 years or more, living in the Henderson district of Singapore in November 1997<sup>(1)</sup>. The objectives of the study were to assess functional status, activities of daily living (ADL), physical and mental health, social well-being and family care. Testing for cognitive deficit was by a 10-item questionnaire, the Elderly Cognitive Assessment Questionnaire (ECAQ)<sup>(2)</sup> and for the assessment of depression, a modified version of the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS)<sup>(3)</sup> was used.

In the sample there were 121 elderly (mean age 84.3 years), with 23 men (19%) and 98 women (81%). The majority lived with their families (86%), 10% with friends and 4% alone. The social resources rating scale assesses social relationships of the elderly person and whether help is available if needed – 81% were satisfied with their social resources and only 19% expressed dissatisfaction. The performance rating scale of ADL is a measure of independence – 72% had good or mild impairment of ADL, and 18% had moderate or severe impairment. Those with moderate or severe impairment of ADL had physical or mental disorders like stroke, cancer, chronic bronchitis, renal failure, heart diseases, depression and dementia.

In the mental health assessment, although many elderly people had mild symptoms of memory or sleep problems, only 20% had depression as assessed on the GDS and 14% had low ECAQ score (4 point or less) which is indicative of cognitive deterioration, commonly due to dementia eg. Alzheimer's Disease.

The results of this study indicated that the majority of octogenarians were not frail but were quite independent. This is comparable to the WHO socio-medical survey of the elderly in the developed countries<sup>(4)</sup>. What is important in future research is to ascertain risk factors of those with poor health and more importantly, factors predicting healthy ageing. The data from the United States and Europe may not be relevant to an Asian population because of cultural difference in health perception, diet, lifestyle and availability of geriatric services.

CENSA has embarked on a multi-disciplinary research project for a longitudinal study of a cohort of elderly people in Singapore. It is anticipated that the cohort

would be followed up for 5 to 10 years to ascertain changes in health and social well-being. Longitudinal studies on ageing, conducted in Boston, Durham, Baltimore and Lund, have yielded valuable information on normal ageing. The CENSA project is important not only for future planning of services but it also gives us vital data on the norms of elderly people in an Asian community.

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#### **Cover Photo**

### **St Luke's Hospital for the Elderly**

St Luke's Hospital for the Elderly is a 224-bedded community hospital. It was set up by 8 foundation churches as a community outreach project. While St Luke's is a private hospital, it is a non-profit organisation.

We first opened doors and accepted patients in March 1996. While St Luke's is a Christian organisation, admission is open to patients of all races and religion. The bulk of our admissions are for rehabilitation and convalescence, post stroke and fractures. The majority of our patients have multiple problems in that they not only have a functional disability but also medical, social and emotional problems.

Our vision is to be a haven of quality care and compassionate service for the elderly in Singapore. Our mission is to provide holistic care to the sick. Every patient on admission is assessed not only for medical but also functional, emotional, social and spiritual areas. The aim is always to rehabilitate and maximise the elderly patient's potential to the point where they can return to the community. As St Luke's is the only hospital in Singapore set up specifically to service the elderly population, education has also been an important part of our service to the community in Singapore. Apart from caregiver education, we also have a Continuing Education Programme open to all health care professionals in Singapore.

While our aim is always to maximise elderly patients' potential, an important part of our work is also to care for those patients who are too ill to go home or to nursing homes. St Luke's aims to help them cope with life's situation with dignity and also help the relatives and patients come to terms with this.

In addition to our staff including doctors, nurses, therapists, social workers and other support staff, we have also been privileged to have the help of many volunteers. Among our volunteers are many doctors who have contributed greatly in helping us care for the increasing number of patients.

Dr C Tan