

Isolated for months, caregivers at old folks' homes show signs of strain

KUALA LUMPUR: After spending almost three months with their charges under the Movement Control Order (MCO), caregivers at nursing homes are at a tipping point as many are starting to find the isolation and separation from their family unbearable.

As part of the measures to prevent the outbreak of Covid-19 in nursing homes, similar to those in the US and the UK, governmental and industry guidelines require all staff to live on-site or in lodgings provided by their employers at assisted living facilities - with visitors allowed, while screening and basic protective equipment, such as masks and gloves, are required at all times.

Much of caregiving to seniors require close contact, such as assisting them to move or something as simple as sitting close and going over photographs with them.

Some caregivers are beginning to feel distressed and depressed with the prospect of being unable and unlikely to see their family for the foreseeable future.

"I used to go home every week. Now, all of a sudden, because of the MCO, I cannot go back home, I feel stressed having to stay in and work," said Parimala Devi, who hails from Port Dickson. As an occupational therapist with the Jalan Gasing branch of The Mansion, she provides physiotherapy to and performs medical massages on patients.

Parimala said she hoped the restrictions will be eased soon, despite the new cases in old folks' homes. Even though she is in

constant contact with her family via video-conferencing, it did not alleviate her loneliness.

Despite all that, she has no plans of quitting.

"I really want to take a long leave (after this). So, I want to go back to my hometown, stay there and then come back to work," she said hopefully.

Meanwhile, Amy, an Indonesian cook with Solace Care nursing home in Taman OUG in the Klang Valley, has not been home for two years and was planning to do so to see her loved ones, especially her ailing father, this year.

"Before this, he wasn't sick. Now he gets sick a lot. If I'm here, I won't be able to take care of him," she said, holding back tears.

Others Bernama talked to expressed similar concerns. Even those who did not mind the MCO expressed unwillingness to be separated from their family for as long as a year.

"Maybe up to six months only," said Doreena Gandik, a paramedic at Solace Care.

Doreena, like others, also expressed hope that the pandemic would be contained enough for restrictions on nursing homes to be eased.

The Health Ministry recently announced that Covid-19 cases among staff and residents in 15 old folks' homes had risen to 23 in just three days from 18 previously.

As a response, some nursing home operators announced that they will be tightening their regulations,

while others are adjusting the restrictions to allow only essential service providers to enter. No staff is allowed to return home.

Anna Chew, Chief Marketing Officer of CARE Concierge who manages The Mansion, said they were monitoring their staff's mental health to make sure they don't break under the strain.

"We believe in good mental health. We don't want them to be isolated from their own families for too long," she said, adding that would also be providing tele-counselling service to the staff.

Sunny Manocha, the founder of Solace Care, told Bernama that the staff also received a pay rise in recognition of their service.

Datuk Dr Christopher Lee, epidemiologist and member of the Selangor Covid-19 Task Force, said keeping staff on-site was good to prevent infection, but rather unsustainable.

"Perhaps this can be implemented only for foreign staff...The important thing is to heighten infection control at these centres among staff," he said.

Chai Sen Tyng, Senior Research Officer, Malaysian Research Institution on Ageing, University Putra Malaysia, agreed.

"The best way forward is to have regular testing, maybe once every two weeks. Even once a month," he said.

"If homes are regularly tested, staff can leave and if they get sick, we can isolate them and stop the spread at the early stage," he added. - Bernama