

Missing their own families

Caregivers at nursing homes have had to stay in-house to safeguard the elderly they care for. The strain of being away from their families is beginning to take its toll.

AFTER almost three months of living at the nursing homes where they are employed, caregivers are at a tipping point, with many starting to find the isolation and separation from their own families unbearable.

As part of the measures to prevent the outbreak of Covid-19 in nursing homes, similar to those in the United States and in Britain, government and industry guidelines require all staff of nursing homes to live on-site or in lodgings provided by their employers.

Visitors are allowed but they have to go through temperature screening and wear protective masks and gloves at all times.

Much of the care-giving for seniors require close contact, such as helping them move about or just sitting beside them to keep them company or go over old family photographs with them.

Though they enjoy their jobs, some caregivers admit that they are starting to feel depressed with the prospect of not being able to see their own family in the foreseeable future.

"I used to go home every week. Now, all of a sudden, because of the MCO, I cannot go home, I feel stressed having to stay in and work," says Parimala Devi, from Port Dickson.

As an occupational therapist with The Mansion, an assisted living home in Petaling Jaya, she does physiotherapy and medical massage therapy on senior residents.

Parimala says she hopes that the restrictions under the conditional movement control order (CMCO) will be eased soon, even though new cases are still being detected in old folks' homes.

Even though she is in constant contact with her family via video-conferencing, it does not help her loneliness.

In spite of this, Parimala has no plans of quitting her job.

"I do really want to take a long leave from work (after this). I just want to go back to my hometown and stay home for some time before returning to work," she says. Amy, an Indonesian cook who



The toll of not being able to see their families is taking a toll of caregivers of old folks homes.

works with Solace Care nursing home in Taman OUG in the Klang Valley, has not been back home for two years.

She was counting on going back to see her loved ones, particularly her ailing father, this year. But it looks like her plans have to be shelved for the moment.

"Before this year, he was ok. He wasn't sick. Now he gets sick a lot. With me here, I am not able to take care of him," she says, holding back tears.

Others caregivers expressed similar concerns. Even those who did not mind the restrictions of the MCO so far, express concern about whether they could be separated from their family for a year.

"Maybe I can take it up to six months only," says Doreena Gandik, a paramedic at Solace Care.

Doreena, like her peers, hopes 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 from 18 in just three days.

In response, some nursing home operators announced that they enforce stricter regulations, while others say they will allow only essential service providers to enter their premises. No staff is allowed to return home and no visitors will be allowed.

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 says, adding that they would also be providing tele-counselling service to the staff.

Sunny Manocha, the founder of

Solace Care, says that his staff 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 was unsustainable.

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

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

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

"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 adds.

— Bernama