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ON THE NEWS STANDS TODAY

## ELECTRIC NEWS

### He's with them to their end

This is the second in a series of heart-warming and sometimes painful stories from our medical social workers. They work quietly among other health professionals in S'pore's public sector hospitals, helping patients deal with difficult issues including financial hardship and impending death.

By Ng Wan Ching

August 12, 2009



IF DEATH is a finishing line, then Mr Gilbert Fan has the job of being by the patient's side every step of the way.

A medical social worker at the National Cancer Centre for the last 10 years, Mr Fan has had to deal with terminally ill patients often.

He remembers one heart-warming case involving a patient in his 70s.

The patient, Mr Nazri (not his real name), was not recovering. Within a short time, he had lost a lot of weight.

It was heart-breaking for his elderly wife to see him in that state.

During the day, she would faithfully spend the day by his side attending to his needs.

When the time came for her to return home to rest, freshen up or cook for their grandchildren, Mr Nazri would become upset.

On many occasions he would end up quarrelling with her as a result.

#### Heart-to-heart talk

Mr Fan, 50, was puzzled by his demanding behaviour and felt sorry for the wife as she was obviously exhausted from the care-giving role.

'Often caregivers suffer from burnout due to the lack of self-care,' said Mr Fan.

One day, after Mr Nazri had one of his disagreements with his wife, Mr Fan took a chance and had a word with him.

He was extra careful with his words.

'He normally came across as a pugnacious person. However, I was surprised when he opened up and shared his fears with me,' said Mr Fan.

It turned out that he was afraid to die during his wife's absence.

She was his pillar of support.

Whenever he was alone in the hospital, he would fight sleep like he would fight death.

'The crippling fear that Mr Nazri felt was real. Many who are dying desire to have someone by their side as they take their last breath.

'The presence of loved ones acts as a protective shield for the dying, where death becomes less fearful and brings about peace and comfort,' said Mr Fan.

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With Mr Nazri's consent to disclose what he had shared, Mr Fan had a session with Mr Nazri's wife.

As she sat there listening to her husband's fears and thoughts, his love for her and their family, she broke down and cried.

In between her sobs, she revealed to Mr Fan her own fears of losing her husband. At 60, she was young to be a widow.

'There was so much in life that she still had yet to share with her husband,' said Mr Fan.

Finally, husband and wife managed to sit together and pour out their feelings to each other.

'They spoke about after life issues, sought mutual comfort and renewed their love for each other,' said Mr Fan.

That very night, Mr Nazri died in his sleep.

Mr Fan likens his job to that of a listener. His patients are the storytellers.

'We help them look at the stories in a different way,' he said.

Many people have many problems. Some have secrets.

Sometimes, they cannot tell it to their close ones, but it may be easier to tell a stranger.

That's where Mr Fan comes in.

He helps these people to go through the past events and past hurts in their lives, the good and bad memories.

'They have to go through this. It's like getting to the finishing line,' said Mr Fan.

However, not every case is successful.

'It depends on the person's extent of grief,' said Mr Fan.

Some people have been molested or raped, others dumped or abused.

'Sometimes, I have people asking me if they should find their birth parents before they die. Identity is a big issue. People want to know who they are before they die,' said Mr Fan.

### **Human behaviour**

Mr Fan is asked all the time why he chose to be a medical social worker.

Doesn't he get tired of managing people's problems all the time?

Yet, not only is he doing this for a career, he intends to continue doing this after retirement.

'I have always liked a down-to-earth job and my gift is in working with people with problems. I have felt that way since young - the interest in looking at human behaviour and the dynamics of human relationships,' he said.

He added: 'They are dealing with life and death all the time. I hope that I can help them find relief, peace and meaning before they die or to have a new life goal if they recover.'

While people naturally learn to be positive in their lives, whether it's through marriage or building families, parting with a loved one is a hard lesson to learn, says Mr Fan.

'No one formally teaches us how to part with life, with people. I think parting is something that people have to learn very personally and subjectively,' he said.

It's those who are too enmeshed and too engrossed in a relationship that they cannot find a way out.

Some people do not accept parting, or the end of life, and they simply become resigned to it. But Mr Fan believes that if the person accepts it, then it will be a nice ending.

It is something that he actively helps his patients to achieve.

'At the end of the day, most people try very hard to come to terms with it. Our goal is to help them where they want to go,' he said.

### **HELPLINES**

**Samaritans of Singapore:** 18002214444 (24hours)

**Comcare Helpline:** 1800222 0000

**Singapore Association for Mental Health:** 1800283 7019

## TAPESTRY OF CARE

YOU can read more such stories in the book 'Tapestry of Care - Voices of Medical Social Workers'.

The 47 stories in the book open a window into the lives of medical social workers and the multi-faceted journeys they take with patients.

In addition to the stories, told from a first-person perspective, practice pointers have been included to make it a reference guide for other medical social workers.

The stories are about abandonment; abuse; awaiting death; grief; hope; suicide and also about it being all in a day's work

You can buy the book (\$14.90 including GST) at selected retail pharmacies of public healthcare institutions, the National University of Singapore Co-operative bookshops and Kinokuniya.

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