

## Eldercare

Like Singapore, Denmark has a rapidly ageing population. The issue is serious enough for the Nordic country to appoint a Minister for Elderly Affairs for the first time in its political history. The Straits Times' Janice Tai visited two cities in Denmark – Copenhagen and Odense – to see how the Danes are tackling the issue, and the lessons for Singapore.

## Nursing homes

# Bright ideas help seniors feel at home

## Nursing centres focus on residents' interests to give them choices, better quality of life

Picture a nursing home that cares for the elderly who are frail, and is housed in the same complex where independent seniors and students live.

That's one of the plans for eldercare in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. When completed in 2024, the Solund nursing home will have 360 care homes for weaker seniors, 150 apartments for young people and 20 units for the elderly who do not need any help.

It will even house a daycare centre.

The development, located next to Sortedam Lake, will include a kindergarten, community hall and cycling lanes within an area about half the size of a soccer field.

That's just one plan. Another will have the Danish government converting existing buildings such as churches and monasteries into eldercare facilities.

The St Joseph nursing home, in the same city, will have 92 new nursing home apartments next to a former church and monastery when it is ready in 2019.

This way, its elderly residents will be able to dine and attend concerts and exhibitions in the vast church hall with its tall stained glass windows.

The neighbouring monastery will be converted to house able elderly people who do not need nursing help.

Like Singapore, the city of Copenhagen is rapidly ramping up the number of nursing homes to cater to rising demand from a growing ageing population.

It plans to build some 1,000 nursing home apartments within the next decade. There are about 3,500 such apartments now.

Singapore intends to increase nursing home beds by 5,000 to 17,000 by 2020.

Ms Birgitte Bo Christensen, chief consultant at Copenhagen's Health and Care Administration, which runs the nursing homes, said: "We are experimenting with different types of nursing homes because we believe they shouldn't all look and feel the same. People have different identities and so should the nursing homes."

Nursing homes in Denmark are private apartments that come with the usual housing leases. Seniors buy the apartments as their own homes. The local authority, or municipality, is responsible for providing services and facilities for the elderly residents in the common areas surrounding these apartments.

Increasingly, the authorities in the city are moving towards imbuing a sense of identity in these homes.

Three years ago, it started looking at how it could create common spaces for older people who share certain interests, wishes and values.

It has since established six nursing homes with different "profiles" or focuses – music, gourmet food, sports, and animals and nature.

There is a "rainbow" nursing home for gay residents and another for ethnic minorities.

At Lindehaven Care Centre, there is a stimuli room where different colours and shades of lighting are used to regulate the body's natural circadian rhythm by mimicking daylight and night hours.

If a dementia patient is restless at night, staff will take him to a room filled with dim orange light to bring down his agitation or stress levels and help him fall asleep. If he is feel-



A room for dementia patients at Lindehaven Care Centre in Copenhagen, which uses different lighting to regulate the body's natural circadian rhythm. Images relevant to a patient's past, such as a familiar place, are also shown on a screen as a form of therapy. ST PHOTO: JANICE TAI

ing sluggish during the day, white or bright lights help to stimulate his brain and give him energy.

Copenhagen's Health and Care Mayor Ninna Thomsen said she also introduced a quality of life voucher system for all nursing home resi-

dents and very frail elderly people who live at home.

Every week, they get a voucher that entitles them to half an hour of services, such as cleaning or getting the caretaker to read the newspaper to them.

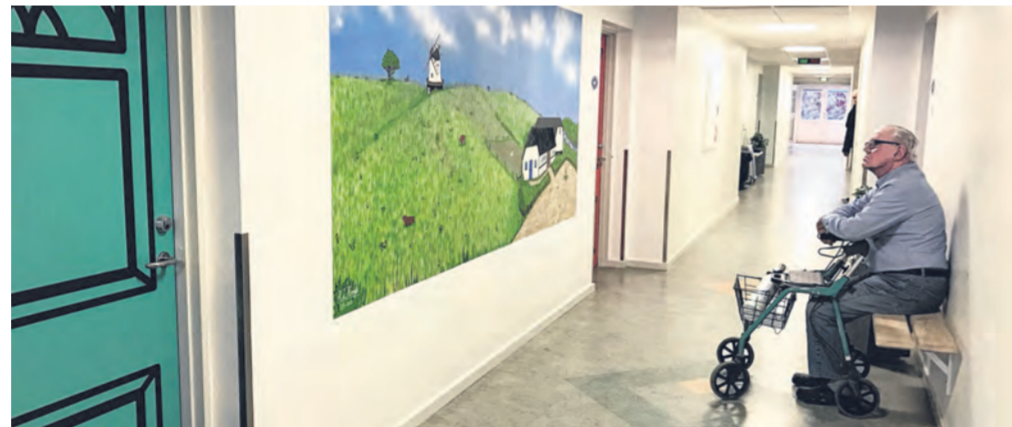
The scheme, which started in Copenhagen, was so well-received that it was implemented nationally last month. Ms Thomsen said it's about moving away from relying on a one-size-fits-all solution.

"I believe in giving the old citi-

zens more choices in life. Choices that not only concern physical help, but also the small things and decisions that enhance their quality of life," she said.

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This painting that dementia patient Hans H. Hansen, 88, is looking at is one of the paintings at Havebaek nursing home in Odense that help patients with dementia relax and reminisce. ST PHOTO: JANICE TAI



## Dementia

## An inclusive town where help is at hand for sufferers

Construction of a small town in Denmark where people in the early stages of dementia can move to and live out the rest of their lives will start next year.

The idea is for people with mild dementia to live in apartments within the district and go about their daily lives in the dementia-friendly town.

They will have access to shops, health centres and other leisure facilities. Service providers, such as bus drivers and librarians, will be trained so they know how to interact and support the patients.

When the patients' mental condition deteriorates, access will be limited to a nearby park or garden.

When their condition worsens, even after 20 years, they will be moved into a nursing home dedicated to dementia patients, which will be located in the same town.

"(The town) is the first of its kind in Denmark. We are trying to make it possible for patients to keep on living a normal life for as long as possible," said Mr Brian Nielsen, alderman of Odense municipality where the City For Life project will be located.

"In the Netherlands, they created a dementia village and there are only elderly people with dementia there. We want to build a new city

specially designed for those with dementia, but not build a wall to cut them off from the outside world because they need a normal environment."

This means that the town will start with young people, families and facilities such as kindergartens.

The project, a partnership between the local municipality and a private, non-profit foundation, will house between 200 and 300 people.

It will be situated in Hojstrup, the western part of Odense, about a two-hour drive from Copenhagen. Odense is Denmark's third-largest city with a population of 193,000.

Currently, the municipality has about 3,000 people with dementia. Slightly more than half are in the early stages of the disease.

"More people are getting dementia earlier in their 50s and 60s and we don't want to just leave them in nursing homes," said Mr Nielsen.

Dementia is one of the most urgent health and social problems facing the elderly in Denmark.

About 93,000 Danes, out of its 5.7 million population, have dementia. With the number projected to grow to 164,000 by 2040, the country launched a new national action plan for dementia in September.

About 470 million kroner (\$95

million) have been set aside over the next four years to improve dementia care and support.

Singapore will have the same number of people with dementia as Denmark by 2030, according to Singapore's Ministry of Health.

Dementia and its accompanying woes cost Singapore \$1.4 billion every year, making it among the biggest drains on the healthcare system here.

Odense aims to train up to 10,000 "dementia friends" in the coming years.

Singapore has already begun conducting such training. About 13,500 people so far have been taught how to spot and help those with dementia. They include students and front-line staff at transport companies, banks, retailers and public organisations.

The initiative, spearheaded by Khoo Teck Puat Hospital and Lien Foundation, started by training 2,000 people in Yishun last year and was later expanded island-wide.

By creating dementia-friendly communities, it aims to reduce the social isolation and stigma associated with the disease.

For instance, if a person takes items from a supermarket without paying, the staff will not assume he is shoplifting.

This is also the vision Denmark is working towards.

Said Mr Nielsen: "We are good at building institutions of care but now we are trying to figure out how to make it possible for them to continue living normal lives in the city with all of us, to be able to take the bus downtown to go to the library, read a newspaper, borrow a book and take it home."

Janice Tai

## Technology

## Innovative aids to help the elderly stay safe and fit at home

Singapore is on the hunt for innovative devices that will help elderly citizens continue to live independently at home.

Such aids, meant to improve daily functioning in areas such as hearing or showering, should be easy to use, safe and cost-effective.

"We hope to attract multi-disciplinary research proposals that are scalable and sustainable, and transform the way we see assistive devices today," said Senior Minister of State for Health Amy Khor as she called for proposals for such devices at a conference last week.

To date, about \$8 million has been awarded to projects under the Care-at-Home Innovation Grant. Some involve having an e-marketplace to match volunteers with seniors requiring home care and a call centre service that will respond to seniors who need help.

Singapore can draw some ideas from Denmark, said Senior Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office Heng Chee How at a dialogue held between the two countries last month to exchange views on how to design elderly-friendly societies. It was organised by the Royal Danish Embassy.

"We can learn from the Danish experience in terms of the preventive and rehabilitative part of care," said Mr Heng, especially since Singapore is moving away from a model it is traditionally strong in, such as acute care, to improve its community- and home-based care.

"Assistive technology is going to become an increasingly important part of the story. As people live longer, how are you going to enable the individual to keep his functioning up for as long as possible?" he said.

Denmark has set up "living labs" countrywide to encourage innovation. Private firms can introduce the latest technology, including eldercare products, at these spaces, allowing government officials and citizens to test them and give feedback. The inventions include a bed that



This rehabilitative game makes use of interactive tiles to help seniors (from left) Hans Joergen and Bendt Fogh improve their balance and reflexes while having a fun workout at the Vennerslund Day Centre. ST PHOTO: JANICE TAI

helps turn a bedridden person on his back or side automatically, and a ceiling hoist that gently lifts a senior from his bed to a wheelchair.

Seniors in Denmark are invited to move into these living labs for a week or a month to try out the technologies for themselves.

Both countries are ageing rapidly. One in four people here will be 65 or above by 2030. Denmark will face a similar situation by 2040.

In recent years, the Danes have used technology to ramp up home care and rehabilitative care.

By 2019, all patients with lung disease in Denmark will monitor and manage their condition on their own at home using electronic devices. These aids will enable them to record and track vital signs, and hold regular videoconferences with nurses and doctors. There are plans to do the same for patients with diabetes and heart disease.

Danish residents are able to use technology to manage their own health at home because they have access to the national electronic health record system.

"I can go into the portal and see all my medicines, lab results, clinical notes written by my doctors, so I am empowered as a citizen to have insight into my own health," said Mr Hans Erik Henriksen, who is chief

executive of Healthcare Denmark, a non-profit organisation that is partly supported by the government.

"Now, a lot of people live for a long time with chronic disease. That means it is not just about the doctor giving you a pill or sewing you back together any more – you have to manage it yourself at home," said Ms Ninna Thomsen, Copenhagen's health and care mayor.

Some assistive technology can also be used in daycare centres or nursing homes in the community. For instance, the Vennerslund Day Centre in Copenhagen partnered the Technical University of Denmark to introduce a game that helps seniors improve their balance and reaction times. Robotic tiles controlled by a tablet light up when the user steps on them in a certain sequence.

"I can't afford to buy it but noticed the fun we had when we played it together as a group," said Mr Hans Joergen, 80, who goes to the centre three times a week. The game, which costs about \$7,000, is free for use at various daycare centres.

"It's fantastic to use technology this way to keep our limbs strong and nimble indoors when the weather outside isn't good for walking in the woods."

Janice Tai