



A volunteer leading a tour of a graveyard in the town of Todmorden in West Yorkshire, Britain. The tours are part of a community-generated festival, called Pushing Up Daisies, that aims to start conversations about death, dying and bereavement. The festival is run entirely by volunteers. PHOTO: MARVIN TANG/LIEN FOUNDATION

Lessons from Britain's compassionate cities

Janice Tai

In the small town of Todmorden in West Yorkshire, Britain, volunteers take people on graveyard tours.

Neighbourhood florists run workshops to get people talking about end-of-life issues, using the life cycle of flowers as inspiration.

And funeral brass bands offer music as part of a community-initiated festival to start conversations around death and bereavement.

In East London, St Joseph's Hospice runs a Compassionate Neighbours social movement that matches volunteers with people living with a long-term or terminal illness. Its 200 volunteers – the youngest is 24 years old and the oldest is 86 – are trained in areas such as relationship analysis, active listening and self-care. The volunteers

are matched to people who live nearby and have similar interests.

Severn Hospice in Shropshire adopted a similar programme and there has been a significant reduction in the use of unscheduled healthcare services by people receiving volunteer support. Emergency services were freed up to tend to more complicated medical cases.

These are some examples of "compassionate communities" in Britain. Earlier this week, Professor Allan Kellehear, a palliative care expert from Britain, was invited to Singapore to share how compassionate cities can be built. He was the one who developed a charter to guide the systematic formation – from workplaces to schools to policy work – of a compassionate city.

Prof Kellehear, a professor of end-of-life care at the University of Bradford, founded the world's first

academic public health palliative care unit in Australia in the 1990s.

At a workshop as part of the 12th Asia Pacific Hospice Conference, he discussed the topic with key stakeholders such as Ms Teoh Zsin Woon, the Ministry of Health's deputy secretary for development, Ms Denise Phua, an MP and disability rights advocate, Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, and Sister Geraldine Tan, administrator of St Joseph's Home.

A compassionate city is defined as a community that recognises the needs of the terminally ill, their caregivers and the bereaved, and seeks to enlist all sectors of society to support them and reduce the negative social, psychological and medical impact of serious illnesses, caregiving and bereavement.

Ms Phua said that before people

can be galvanised to take action, there must first be sufficient awareness and understanding of the needs of the dying and their caregivers.

Dr Koh suggested tapping the resources of charities, and faith and civic groups to get people to plan early for death.

Said Prof Kellehear: "It is good to look at community engagement, but instituting policies regarding death, loss and care is also key because there may be structural barriers in society that need to be addressed."

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• To find out more about compassionate communities, visit www.aftercicely50.com. Lien Foundation produced the films to mark 50 years of the modern hospice and palliative care movement.

Issues of isolation, mental health

FROM B1

dex released by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Singapore was ranked the 12th best place in the world to die. It did well in affordability and quality of care, but fared the weakest in community engagement.

Latest data also showed that many Singaporeans do not die at home, though surveys indicated that most wish to. Only about one in four who died in the first three months of this year did so at home. Most of them – 63 per cent – died in hospitals.

Two of Singapore's regional health systems – the Eastern Health

Alliance and National Healthcare Group – will be running pilot programmes to provide palliative home care for non-cancer patients, targeted to reach out to about 3,000 patients over the next five years, said Health Minister Gan Kim Yong at the Asia Pacific Hospice Conference last Thursday.

Prof Kellehear said terminally ill people and their caregivers often face issues of loneliness, isolation and mental health conditions because they are hidden and disenfranchised from the wider society.

To embrace and support this group of people within the community, the palliative-care sector has come up with some initiatives.

Next month, St Joseph's Home in Jurong West Street 24, which serves both hospice and nursing-home residents, will open a childcare centre on its grounds to encourage inter-generational interac-

tion and bonding, and meet the needs of back-to-work parents.

"Back-to-work adults can leave their infants or children at the centre while visiting their elderly parents, and the inter-generational programmes are aimed at instilling in our children compassion and respect for our elders," said St Joseph's administrator Geraldine Tan.

It is believed to be the first such facility to have a childcare centre on-site. The children can mingle with the elderly at a playground on its grounds or visit their seniors upstairs and have tea with them.

Other efforts to bring the community closer to the terminally ill and their caregivers include getting residents and volunteers in the neighbourhood to reach out to those in their midst.

Said the MOH spokesman: "We have started discussions with HCA Hospice Care on working together

to support the caregivers of those who pass on, with befriending and emotional support."

HCA Hospice Care is the largest provider of home palliative-care services in Singapore.

Separately, in the next few months, the Singapore Hospice Council is commissioning a study to find out how people deal with loss in their lives, including bereavement, and whether current services are adequate in meeting their needs.

Dr Angel Lee, who chairs the Singapore Hospice Council, said: "We have set up a grief and bereavement work group, comprising health- and social-sector people, to look into this area."

"All of us experience many losses in life, be it relationships or our identity or roles in life, and we don't deal with those losses very well."

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