

Home sweet home for old folk?

THERE have been many calls recently for the government to make it compulsory for Malaysians to care for their aged parents, but a group of senior citizens believe a more practical solution is to set up more old folks homes.

They said this was necessary, especially in urban areas, going by the rising number of senior citizens. There is a huge demand for places in old folks homes.

The National Council of Senior Citizens' Organisations Malaysia (NACSCOM) proposed that 50 new homes be set up within five years.

Its president, Datuk Lum Kin Tuck, said the target was reflective of the country's aging population who are in increasing need of support.

"We inherited nine homes from the British administration. They were all built before Independence. Half a century later, we still only have those nine homes," said Lum, 93.

That Selangor has some 20 homes run by non-governmental organisations shows that there is a demand and need, said Lum.

The number of elderly people in the country has doubled since the 1980s to almost 1.4 million in 2000. Increased life expectancy and low birth rates mean Malaysia has an aging population. Modern living, however, has made it increasingly difficult for children to care for their aged parents. A group of senior citizens believe setting up more homes is the way to go. Is it? **CHAI MEI LING** finds out

Charles Wilkins, founder of My Manor Sdn Bhd, a private home for the elderly, agreed that more homes were needed.

At the same time, the standard of care for the old should be raised as a way to minimise the stigma attached to living in an old folks home.

"If you're an old person going to a home, you have no friends and you don't know what to expect. That's absolutely frightening.

"When you raise the standard of the homes, it becomes more acceptable."

The government, said Wilkins, could work with the private sector to set up more

50 or 60. They die at 80."

The upward trend in divorce also means more older people are aging alone. Those with children can no longer be sure that they would be taken care of as they enter the golden years.

"A lot of old folk get no support from their children. With nowhere to go, some live on the streets. Some want to end their lives.

"It's very pitiful to see these lonely old men and women," said Lum.

Tang Yoon Loy, manager of the NACSCOM home in Setapak, advised the old to not part with their savings.

"If you want to pass something on to your children,



NASCOM has two homes in Setapak and Kota Damansara to cater to the demand.

However, setting up the structure is just half the job done, as homes should also be properly managed to provide the best care.

In his survey of homes in Selangor, Lum found many to be in bad condition.

"Some NGO-run homes are deplorable. They put five to six people in a room and it's very unhygienic. There are those who exploit the old by abusing public funding.

"Even private homes, which charge RM1,500 and above a month, sometimes provide grossly inadequate services."

Lum also suggested that a ministry for the elderly be set up to manage the complex issues facing senior citizens in the country.

The Social Welfare Department, he said, already has its hands full handling many other target groups — the disabled, children and the poor.

private sector to set up more homes. Ampang Welfare Committee member Cheah Soon Seong said having more old folks homes would benefit those without dependents.

"There are a lot of old folk out there without a roof over their heads and who are surviving on handouts. They should be the target group.

"Homes should not be built for those with families and children to care for them."

Lum said, however, that although the family unit has traditionally been advocated to care for their elders, pressures from modern living have forced many urban families to abandon this responsibility.

"In today's nuclear family, the husband and wife have to work. They find great difficulty in caring for the old. A lot of people want to support their parents, but can't afford to do so with little savings, especially the lower income group. This is the reality.

"Moreover, the population is aging. People do not die at

thing on to your children, don't give them everything you own. Keep some for rainy days. I've seen enough cases of families abandoning the old once the person is frail and penniless."

Wilkins said ideally, families should be the ones caring for the old but placing the elderly in reputable residential facilities would also give them the quality of life they deserve.

"We've got to help people who want to look after the elderly. Maybe we can have allowances or tax rebates for one of the family members to stay home and care for the old person.

"This is because most Malaysian families find it very difficult to look after old people at home in a way that's actually good for the old person. They work so hard; they are out from 8am till 10pm. Their elders are left with the maid.

"But looking after the old can be a very stressful, full-time job. So if families can't cope, they should be allowed the option of providing the elderly with assisted living care at a residential facility."

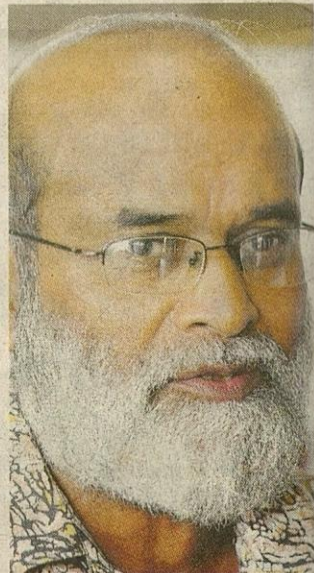


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What residents at homes say

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EVEN IF I STAY WITH MY FAMILY, I DON'T THINK I CAN GET THIS HAPPINESS. ”



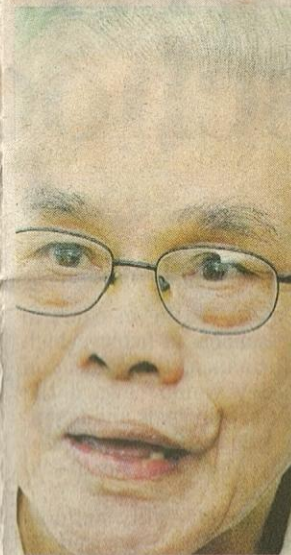
At NACSCOM Old Folks Home in Setapak

Letchuman, 61

I WAS doing well as a businessman, but I lost everything a few years ago. Some relatives ran off with my money. That's all I will say. It's not a nice story.

I had thought of ending my life many times but there was always intervention.

I was referred here by the Social Welfare Department. I'm fine here. It's been three years already.



Lim Yoke Bee, 72

THE environment here feels like home. We're encouraged to live as a family. There are four to five people in a unit, and we cooperate to keep it presentable.

Of course, old people being old people, we have tempers. But we don't quarrel, and that's good enough.

I like staying here. It's serene, and the big field right next to our flat lends a lot of space to this place. I feel free.

Every morning, I do some exercises such as sit-ups and pumping. Then, I'd go to the market to buy the papers and breakfast. I don't sit at the coffee shops.

Back home, I do the laundry and have lunch. Then, it's time for an afternoon nap, after which I paint. It's very basic watercolour painting. I'm still learning

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THIS IS NO PALACE, BUT WE CAN'T BE COMPLAINING TOO MUCH. ”



Ampang Old Folks Home

Choi See Yuk, 80

I WAS born in Fuchou, China. When war broke out, I went to Singapore and subsequently to Malaya when I was in my 20s.

I've been a waiter in coffee shops my whole life. I worked until I was 74, stopping only because my boss was closing down his business. With no income, I had to move out from my rented room at Jalan Alor. I came to this home more than five years ago.

I've never been married, so I have no dependents.



Yap Lin Chun, 75

THIS year, there's less of a Chinese New Year feel. We still receive ang pow from visitors though. The money is used wisely because it's going to last us for the whole year.

I don't spend much, it's mostly on transport. A taxi ride to the Kuala Lumpur Hospital costs RM12. I go there every three months for check-ups, and every other month to get medication. I have high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Sometimes, I visit my sister, who's staying in Sentul. A trip, to and fro, costs RM50. She's my only family. I'm single. My daily routine starts at 6am. I'd go out to buy some noodles for breakfast. Then I'd help prepare vegetables in the kitchen.

The food here is all right; there's fish or meat during every meal. I'm not a fussy eater. In the afternoon,



My Manor Sdn Bhd

Khoo Cheow Kin, 90

I AM one of the first residents here and I like this place very much. It's very quiet, and the environment is good.

I get to eat five times a day! Vegetables, fish and chicken are served every day. For tea, we get fried meehoon.

Normally, I wake up at 6.30am. After a bath, we have breakfast out in the patio where the air is cool. Exercise is at 9am, after which I read the papers. In the afternoon, we have activities like bingo and quizzes. I enjoy karaoke the most. Singing makes us happy.

Bingo is fun, too. The person who wins the most in a week gets a present, like a box of chocolates or biscuits. The residents get along well.

Charles (the founder) is very nice to us. He makes sure



I have a room to myself. There are four people in my unit and we do our own cleaning up. There's a cook who prepares our meals. Everything is okay. I have no complaints. Even if I stay with my family, I don't think I can get this happiness.

For a side income, I sell newspapers in the morning in the open area at this flat. I earn RM15 on a Sunday and RM4 to RM5 a day for the rest of the week. For every paper I sell, I get 10 sen.

I can't do other jobs as I suffer from rheumatic arthritis which I got four years ago. But I can still walk with the aid of a walker. To be well again, I'll need an operation but that'll cost RM15,000.

But pain is not a problem. I'm satisfied with what I have now.

Tang, our home manager, is a gentleman. He has my respect for what he is doing for us.

painting. I'm still learning from the books. I draw scenery, portraits, animals, buildings — anything that catches my fancy.

I've no income now, having retired six years ago from being a taxi driver, but visitors bring me drawing pads and watercolours. It's not a problem.

After dinner, I go up to the top floor to play my harmonica and sing. It's very relaxing, and good exercise for the heart and lungs.

■ Set up by NACSCOM six years ago, the old folks home in Setapak accepts the hard core poor and people with no dependents. They have to be above 60, independent and able to care for themselves. Food and shelter is free of charge. Running the centre is a full-time job for home manager Tang Yoon Loy and his wife.

Staying here is okay. Donations from the rich help us weather the storms. Thank God for the good Samaritans.

I go out every day. I'll either hang out at the coffee shop or mamak, or walk around in a shopping mall near here. Sometimes I look at the pictures in the newspapers. I can't read.

When I fall sick, I go to a nearby clinic. The doctor is kind. He charges me only for medication and not for consultation.

Every other year, I fly back to China. There are still some distant relations there. I do this all by myself — going to the travel agency, asking for a good rate, taking the flight.

I can afford to do so because I save up from the ang pow. If you're not a big spender, it's enough for the whole year.

The food here is so-so. Only the basics are provided. But generally, we don't demand anything.

later. In the afternoon, sometimes we play cards, but usually there is little interaction among us old folks. What is there to talk about?

We do our own chores here. I don't need the caretakers to serve me. I don't go out often. Also, the weather's very hot these days, so I prefer to stay indoors. By 9pm, I'll be in bed.

I've been here for three years. I used to stay in Bukit Bintang, in a room I rented for RM200 plus. I did odd jobs, but I had to stop working six to seven years ago when the ailments came. When my savings shrunk, I registered myself into this home.

■ The Ampang Old Folks Home houses 50 residents. Shelter, food and basic personal necessities are provided for.

I take my medicine on time. He takes real good care of us. The nurses are very pleasant, too. They help me to walk by holding my hands. Every Chinese New Year, I head to my son's place for reunion dinner. It's the same this year. I used to stay with my son in Sentul. But five years ago, I fell down in the bathroom and broke my hips. I came to My Manor two years ago after staying in a nursing centre. My son and daughter visit me every week.

■ My Manor provides a long-term care alternative for those who need more help than is available at home. Residents pay between RM3,000 and RM5,000 a month. Founded and run by Charles and Janet Wilkins, it is situated in Petaling Jaya, Selangor and has 12 residents — the youngest being 65 and oldest 92.