



HEART OF GOLD

A new hospice programme will help Hong Kong cancer patients

By Jenny McCombie



THE LI KA SHING FOUNDATION'S "Heart of Gold" Hospice Programme has recently been extended from Mainland China to Hong Kong. The programme that reaches nationwide to help terminal cancer patients in their last leg of life will now also help make the final steps of terminal cancer patients in Hong Kong as comfortable and dignified as possible.

Around 10,000 people die of cancer every year in Hong Kong, a figure that represents about a third of all deaths in the city. It is a disease that is almost always associated with extreme physical and mental pain, suffering and anguish. Not just for the patients, but for those around them – their children, siblings, parents and spouses. It is never a quick process; treatments are long, cures can be temporary and relapses are depressingly common, but the hospice programme looks to address both the physical and mental suffering involved.

The Hong Kong hospice service programme will see the establishment of eight hospice day care centres in the Hong Kong Hospital Authority's hospital clusters and the enhancement of home-based care services, giving comfort to thousands of

terminally-ill patients and their families. This holistic, multi-disciplinary approach focuses on the provision of symptom relief, emotional counselling and spiritual care. Behind each of the patients and their families will be a comprehensive palliative care team comprising doctors, nurses, social workers and psychologists.

"Hospice care is all about extraordinary people taking the time to bring hope and improve the lives of others," said Foundation Chairman Li Ka-shing. "Dignity in death is priceless and care and respect for those with a terminal illness are key indicators of our social values and the mark of any civilised society."

Praising all front-line hospice staff involved in the programme, Mr Li said: "Your work is imbued with sadness but it is admirable. It makes a positive difference to the suffering. Hope transcends and connects, and you bring peace, comfort and dignity."

The palliative care services will also extend psychological and bereavement support to anguished families, especially children, during their suffering and loss. Under this programme, 8,000 psychological counselling sessions will be provided, while an



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The hospice day care centres provide patients with comfortable facilities staffed by experts.

estimated 750 bereaved children and 500 families will benefit. It is anticipated that the enhanced services made possible by the programme will serve an additional 5,000 cancer patients, 20,000 day attendances and 12,000 home visits.

The programme has received a warm welcome from the medical community. "Previously, such a comprehensive team was a rarity and to have all of these resources together and, most importantly, all in the same Oncology unit has dramatically improved the welfare and lessened the anxiety of incurable cases," said Dr Rico Liu, Honorary Clinical Assistant Professor at Queen Mary Hospital.

"Opening the lines of communication, helping patients to decide the best course of treatment for them, completely changes their outlook to a more positive one. Today, medicine is about providing a patient, be they terminally ill or not, with a better quality of life – right up until the end."

The eight public hospitals participating in the Hong Kong programme are Queen Mary Hospital, Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital, Grantham Hospital, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, United Christian Hospital, Princess Margaret Hospi-

tal, Prince of Wales Hospital and Tuen Mun Hospital.

In addition to the Li Ka Shing Foundation's donation of HKD42 million, the Hong Kong Hospital Authority is providing a grant of HKD23 million. Anthony Wu, Chairman of the Hospital Authority, expressed gratitude to the Foundation for its support. "Palliative care service is also a core component of cancer care and will be provided as early as when terminal illnesses are diagnosed in cancer patients," he said. "Assessment by multi-disciplines will then be made to plan for the patients' physical and psychosocial needs. The generous donation will support the promotion of palliative care services to benefit needy patients."

Mr Li pioneered the charitable hospice movement in China. Since 1998, 65,000 patients have been offered free hospice and palliative care through the "Heart of Gold" programme. During 2008, the service will expand to 28 hospices nationwide, offering care to more than 18,000 patients each year.

To date, total funding for the "Heart of Gold" programme exceeds HKD240 million. 

