

Funding full-time care

Perak Dementia Society is seeking public support to finance the construction of the first purpose-built home in Malaysia. The residential facility, estimated to cost Rm4mil, will provide rehabilitation and activities to help those with dementia.

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THE Perak Dementia Society in Ipoh, which operates a daycare centre for patients, is now looking to expand to a full-time residential care home.



Brain exercise: Staff at the BebeLEC Day Centre in Ipoh assisting some patients in a cognitive games session. — RONNIE CHIN/The Star

Its chairman Prof Dr Esther Ebenezer said a piece of land had been donated to the society near its BEBELEC Day Centre in Jalan Lang.

She is now seeking sponsors to help build the society's first 24-hour residential care home for dementia patients.

Prof Esther, who is a psychiatrist, said this would be the first purpose-built, dementia-specific residential care centre in Malaysia.

“To set up such a residential centre involves a lot of money, between Rm3mil and Rm4mil.

“We are really thankful to a donor who contributed the piece of land near the daycare centre.

“The next big step will be to build a centre to cater to the needs of the dementia patients,” she said.

The specialist in geriatric psychiatry said plans were also afoot to set up a cafe at the residential centre for support group activities.

“The cafe will be a nice venue for support groups or caregivers to meet and share their challenges and triumphs in caring for their loved ones with dementia.”

The current daycare centre is Malaysia’s first dementiaspecific care centre, she said.

Prof Esther said there were other care centres in Kuala Lumpur, Johor and Seremban but those were not specific to dementia patients.

The name of the daycare centre, BEBELEC, is amalgamated from the name and initials of its donors, the late Bebe Lim and her late husband Dr Lim Eng Cheang.

Bebe was Prof Esther’s patient and the couple had always wanted to do something for dementia patients.

Their parting gift was sponsorship of the land and construction of the daycare centre.

The BEBELEC centre has been in operation since 2020.

It was officially launched by Raja Permaisuri Perak Tuanku Zara Salim in September 2021.

The daycare centre was constructed specifically tailored to ensure the safety of dementia patients and meet their specific needs.

There are currently about 30 patients at the daycare facility.

Prof Esther, who lectures at Universiti Kuala Lumpur Royal College of Medicine Perak (UNIKL RCMP), said handrails were strategically located to enable patients to manoeuvre safely within the centre without any risk of falling.

Facilities at the centre include a therapeutic garden with flowers and herbs besides a small water fountain and fish pond.

The centre also has a dining hall, gymnasium, music and activity rooms.

Every year, the society organises a Memory Walk in conjunction with World Alzheimer’s Month in September.

This year, the Memory Walk will be held this Sunday at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Recreation Park (Polo Ground) from 6.30am.

Prof Esther said the objective of the walk was to increase awareness of the disease because very often, people assume that it is a normal part of ageing when senior citizens suffer from memory problems.

“We also want to increase public awareness of the centre and its services. Instead of having dementia patients sitting idle at home, we have a full list of activities for them from morning until evening at our centre.

“Their caregivers drop them off at the centre where we will care for them until they are picked up in the evenings.”

Prof Esther said that when patients arrive at the centre, they have their morning walks in the garden, eat breakfast, exercise at the indoor gym with a physiotherapist, play cognitive games and attend singing sessions – there are even volunteers who play the piano, guitar and drums to accompany them.

The centre’s staff also provide massage for patients.

The dining hall where patients have their lunch, is furnished with marble top, wooden tables and chairs for a nostalgic ambience.

“Those who want to take a nap after lunch can do so while others can watch television or chat with friends in other rooms.

“We also have colouring, painting, reading and arts and crafts sessions before patients are served evening tea. Then, their family members or caregivers come to fetch them.”

Prof Esther said UNIKL medical students would visit the centre on Monday and Friday mornings to engage with the patients in physical activities.

The students take part in cognitive activities like playing games and singing songs, where they get to learn the patients' level of deficits when interacting with them.

“As people age, there is a higher chance of them developing dementia.

“Statistics show that there are about 100,000 people in Malaysia suffering from dementia.

“At the centre, we only accept patients who have received a dementia diagnosis. A very nominal fee is charged to upkeep the centre,” said Prof Esther.

Patients receive nutritious meals daily at the centre, she said.

“Every fortnight, a committee member involves the patients in baking cakes and cookies.

“Three private hospitals rotate to provide lunch weekly and the centre's cook will prepare additional food to supplement these meals.

“We have a hairstylist who comes monthly to do haircuts for patients. Their family members provide consent and pay a nominal fee for the service.”

There are many signs to identify dementia, said Prof Esther.

She said if an active person was noticeably failing in certain aspects, then there was something to be concerned about.

“It is important to observe and compare against a previous level of functionality.

“For example, if an elderly person could previously drive without any issues but now shows deteriorating coordination, this could be a sign of dementia.

“Parking the car and not being able to find it later, driving aimlessly, forgetting to take medication or doubling the dose, having difficulties using ATM cards, misplacing money, going to the market and forgetting to buy certain items or buying items repeatedly, are signs to look out as well.

“Other signs are difficulty in keeping appointments to see doctors or friends, forgetting significant birthdays or anniversaries.”

Prof Esther said these signs included difficulty making phone calls, forgetting to add core ingredients when cooking or adding excessive amounts or absentmindedly leaving food on the stove to burn.

Often, those who develop dementia have trouble handling electrical items, she said, to the extent that even operating a remote control to change TV channels can be a challenge.

“When they start forgetting the names of their friends and they choose to stay at home doing nothing, these are early symptoms which family members often overlook.

“That is why we hold the walk to remind people that this is not a normal part of ageing and that it is a condition that must be diagnosed by doctors.”

At the centre, the patients were seen enjoying themselves in the various activities.

Koh Yuk Chan, 94, who was seen playing cognitive games, said she enjoyed the singing and bingo sessions the most.

“I like music, it is soothing and I find it relaxing.”

James Velayuthan, 85, likes coming to the daycare centre instead of being home alone when his son goes to work.

“Morning walks are good as I get to exercise. I usually make it a point to walk around my neighbourhood as well.

“Getting to know more people here is interesting and time passes by fast,” said James.