Asia’s First Palliative Care Research Center in Singapore

Asia’s first palliative care research and training center to be set up in Singapore has taken off. The establishment of Lien Centre for Palliative Care is a collaboration between the Lien Foundation, Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School Singapore (Duke-NUS), the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) and Singapore Health Services (SingHealth).

The Lien Centre for Palliative Care fills the gap for formal research about dying and end-of-life care. The need has become more pressing as Singapore grapples with an ageing population.

End-of-life issues have become central to Singapore’s healthcare policies, especially those that shape the provision of health services.

Death and dying are traditionally taboo subjects in countries in Asia. While efforts to take the shroud off the subject of death have progressed much over the years, there is still a lack of knowledge about the needs of the dying in Asian communities. Research efforts in palliative care have remained relatively underdeveloped despite some pioneering work in this area.

The collaboration broadens the base of trained expertise in palliative care and research, in order to raise awareness of the cultural differences in attitudes and beliefs towards dying, and pinpoint issues of concern within the local communities. These efforts will inform healthcare policy-making and medical practice in tandem with the Singapore government’s efforts to improve end-of-life care.

The center serves as a key node of expertise, research and training for the region, helping to raise national and regional standards of care for the dying. It will also serve as a focal point for palliative care professionals throughout Asia. The East-West connection in palliative care will be strengthened by the Centre’s strong links with Duke University’s Centre for Palliative Care and Centre for Care at the End of Life in the United States.

The Lien Centre for Palliative Care is now training 20 doctors and nurses from Singapore and the region. They are enrolled in the Graduate Certificate Course in Palliative Care from Flinders University, Australia. Some of them are on fellowships and scholarships from the Lien Foundation. Others are on clinical fellowships at the NCCS and the teaching programs of the Asia Palliative Hospice Care Network.

Dr Cynthia Goh, center director, said: “The centre is also involved in the teaching of medical students at the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School Singapore and the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.”

Research programs have been initiated to look into the care Singaporeans have been receiving during the last year of life, and preferences of the public towards the type and place of care.

Research collaborations have been established not only with Duke University, but also locally with the Departments of Social Work and Sociology of the National University of Singapore (NUS), hospitals of both SingHealth and the National Healthcare Group, the community hospice services, and with the Ministry of Health.

Service development programs are also being planned, including a strategy to improve the standards of hospice home care, and a model for bereavement care.

The Lien Foundation is contributing S$7.5 million (US$5.01 million) over five years to set up the center, with potential for a further collaboration. This sum is being matched dollar-for-dollar by the Singapore government.