More dentists in Singapore are being trained to treat elderly patients with physical and cognitive impairment

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In the seven years since Singapore welcomed its first geriatric and special needs dentistry, more has been done to cater to the oral care needs of the frail elderly, though there is a clear need for more dentists with such training as the population ages.

Today, there are five dentists who are trained in geriatric and special needs dentistry, working at four public hospitals, said a Ministry of Health (MOH) spokesperson.

They are at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, National University Hospital (NUH), Ng Teng Fong General Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

Dr Tan Mok Ng, director of the Oral Health Centre at the National Dental Centre Singapore (NDCS) in Outram also has one geriatric and special needs dentist, and is expecting two more to complete such training.

The NDCS clinic’s head, Dr Yang Jingxiao said the plan is to offer another two or three of such positions from July next year.

The exact number of geriatric dentists here is not clear, but a handful have completed the three-year training in geriatric and special needs dentistry while several others have completed about one year training, she said.

Already, patients visit the clinic, which opened in 2018, has almost doubled to nearly 6,000 by last year and it is expected to continue to grow.

These two new facilities will offer geriatric and special needs dental health services and facilities – the National University Centre for Oral Health, Singapore (NUCHS) – opened in July this year.

NDCS and MUCSH have wheelchair-friendly facilities that enable patients to receive treatment in their wheelchairs.

More dentists will be completing their training in this area. Two are already enrolled in the inaugural intake of the Geriatric Birkens at Geriatric Dentistry at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Faculty of Dentistry.

They will complete their year-long postgraduate programme that allows practicing dentists to equip themselves with the skills to look after the oral health needs of frail and medically compromised elderly living in the community or nursing homes.

Launched in July, it made it possible for dentists to get geriatric dentistry training locally instead of having to go overseas.

This was announced by the NUS dentistry faculty last month in conjunction with its 100th-anniversary celebrations.

The fact that geriatric and special needs dentistry is not considered a specialist specialty in Singapore may deter some from getting this training, though the MOH spokesman said last week that the ministry “will be reviewing the need for the various dental specialties, including geriatric and special needs dentistry.”

Professor Patrick Finan, dean of the NUS Faculty of Dentistry, said that people can benefit from dentists who have advanced training in this field as they will have a broad appreciation of issues related to aging and their impact on oral health.

“Aging population brings with it multiple chronic conditions and studies have long recognized the systemic link between poor oral health and other chronic health conditions such as diabetes,” he said.

“The training will allow these dentists to deliver evidence-based care and reduce the incidence of oral disease, poor nutrition and compromised quality of life associated with dental disease in the elderly population.”

While elderly can benefit from dentists with such training, the general dental practitioners and dental specialists are equipped to manage the oral health of more elderly patients, said the MOH spokesperson.

“The care where the general dentists are not able to manage, due to severe physical and cognitive impairments or complex medical conditions, the general dentists can refer the elderly to the geriatric dentists,” Dr Yang said.

This will ensure timely and appropriate care for patients who require the services of geriatric dentists.

“A geriatric dentistry usually handles elderly patients with certain physical and cognitive impairments.”

Dr Yang said the provision of dementia-friendly, non-pharmacological interventions can result in improved self-perceived oral hygiene, which results in increased risk of tooth decay due to the plaque accumulation, said Dr Yang.

It can also result in mood-boosting, due to the plaque accumulation resulting in gum infection.

“In managing these dental conditions, the geriatric dentists need to think of solutions to help the elderly patients manage his or her own brushing,” she said.

“This can include modifying mouthrinses to improve the grip or using electric toothbrushes.”

If the elderly patient is looked after by a caregiver or helper at home, the dentist will need to educate and emphasize the importance of good hygiene to the caregiver, as well as to be on the lookout for the proper techniques and equipment when brushing for their loved one.

CONTINUED ON D3

We try not to look only at their oral conditions, we will also look at their social issues, their ability to accept treatment, etc. If there are behavioural issues, the dentists will see them at a slower pace. Instead of cleaning the whole mouth, we may clean it segment by segment.

DR TAM MOK NG, an associate consultant at the MUCSH, who is one of the three dentists she who has completed geriatric dentistry training. She said dementia and Alzheimer’s disease are conditions that affect patients’ ability to understand and remember.

Patient needs change over a long period of time, memory is affected first, she added. “Practitioners need to understand and adjust treatment plans and accommodate the patient’s needs. Dementia does not necessarily mean the end of treatment,”

Get treatment before cognitive impairment worsens

FROM D1

Geriatric dentists understand the changes that occur in cognitive impairment. For instance, dementia patients generally do not remember oral care instructions as well as before and may take a longer time to understand certain words or sentences, said Dr Yang.

“Alzheimer’s patients, generally forget routine visits and reminders of medications,” she said.

Dr Tan said it is important to ensure patients’ care is consistent, describing patients who are sometimes forgetful.

“Maintenance of a stable and consistent level of care is important for these patients, as it helps them feel more comfortable.”