

## News

# Knees tell of BUMPY FAMILY TIES

**Woman, 87, is among some elderly people who have been neglected by children**

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**T**HERE are two large bumps on her kneecaps. Months after she slipped and fell in the toilet, the swelling remains.

After the incident, she feels giddy whenever she stands up for too long.

But Madam Ng, 87, (not her real name) didn't tell anyone.

The incident came to light only during a visit by volunteers from the Lions Befrienders Service Association, Singapore to her one-room flat in Ang Mo Kio.

The well-spoken Madam Ng said she was too shy to tell anyone about it. And she felt she couldn't afford to seek medical treatment.

This is the second time Madam Ng has fallen at home.

Her husband died 10 years ago and she has been living alone since.

Madam Ng does not qualify for public assistance as she has five children. This gives \$300 a month to single



**HELP AT HAND:** (Top) A volunteer rubbing oil onto Madam Ng's knees. (Below) A sticker marks the home of an elderly person who is regularly visited by Lions Befrienders volunteers.

elderly people who have little or no family support and cannot work.

The latest data from the Singapore Census of Population showed that 12.3 per cent of those aged 65 and above are not living with their spouses or children.

Some of them live with other elderly persons. For those like Madam Ng, having a family does not translate into support in their old age.

She does not hear from any of her children nor does she receive money from them. She does not even know where they live.

While Madam Ng may not have been physically abused, this is also a type of elder abuse as it involves neglect, said senior social worker Alvin Chua from TruSafes Centre.

The centre specialises in helping families manage issues of domestic violence and elder abuse.

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) defines elder neglect as a "deliberate refusal to meet basic needs, such as the failure to provide food, shelter, clothing, medical care and financial support".

## Grandson's wedding

The last time any of Madam Ng's relatives visited her was last December. Her eldest grandson was getting married the next day, so she was invited to stay at his family's place for a night.

Since then, the grandson of 16 has not spoken to any of her children or their families.

She said none of her children or grandchildren visited her during this year's Chinese New Year nor did she receive any calls from them.

Madam Ng said she has given up hoping that her children will visit her.

"It has been more than 10 years since they last visited. What's the point of hoping?" she said. "In the past, when my children didn't visit us, my husband was very sad."

She later revealed that the relationship with her children has been strained since they were young.

"When I scolded them, they would argue with me. My husband didn't care for them," she added. She did not elaborate.



She complained that after her fall, it hurts to even walk around the flat. But all she has done is rub medication on her knees.

But the physical pain is not what has been keeping her awake at night.

Lions Befrienders volunteer Quak Lee Hwang, 66, said disappointment has robbed Madam Ng of many good nights of rest.

"I don't know what's wrong with the family. Sometimes she tells me about her children, but I don't know why they ended up like that," Madam Quak said.

One psychiatric incident has left a deep emotional scar on Madam Ng.

One of her daughters is said to have told Madam Ng's next-door neighbour to ignore Madam Ng and not to care about her.

Madam Ng scoffs at the idea of seeking help through the Maintenance of Parents Act.

"They (her children) will curse me," she said. "If they are already not willing to give, how can I still force them to give?"

The act was passed in 1995 to allow elderly parents aged 60 years and above who cannot support themselves to claim maintenance from their children.

Last year, there were 199 applications filed under the act, compared with 127 in 2008 and 109 in 2007.

In Parliament earlier this year, Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan suggested that Member of Parliament Seah Kian Peng come up with a private member's bill to revise the Act—a challenge which Mr Seah took up.

While the number of applicants for maintenance is on the rise, some, like Madam Ng, still reject the legal route.

According to MCYS, many victims of elder abuse and neglect tend to downplay or deny the mistreatment they suffer. Some do this out of fear of rejection

and disruption of their lives; others, out of pride, embarrassment or shame.

Some are concerned about their family's privacy and worry that legal action might be taken against the alleged abuser.

This could be due to pride, Mr Chua noted.

"The elderly may feel it's very shameful as it is a reflection of their children's poor upbringing. Going to court to make it public is very shameful, and they will do anything to avoid it."

The elderly might not want to blow up the issue as they are still concerned for their children's reputations.

Mr Chua said: "The elderly may be very resigned to their fate but they are not prepared because they fear that they will affect their children's careers. They don't want to shame them or burden them."

While the elderly would inevitably seem to be on the losing end in such cases, Mr Chua qualifies for those that could have been factors that provoked such treatment.

"Some parents could have been authoritarian, for example, they would use the rod every time and then. After using the rod for a while, it is difficult to have a good relationship," he pointed out.

"When one grows stronger and the other grows weaker, the former takes it out on the latter as a form of retribution."

The writers are communication studies graduates of the Nanyang Technological University. This report is based on part of their final-year project, titled *Filial Piety in Ageing Singapore*.

■ In tomorrow's paper, they report on the plight of caregivers of elderly persons.

**HUMANITY ACT:** Senior social worker Alvin Chua explaining the Maintenance of Parents Act at a TruSafes Centre exhibition on elder abuse prevention.