



PHOTO: SING TAO DAILY

*Hospice angels on a mission of mercy*



# THE ULTIMATE VOLUNTEERS



*The volunteers  
lend a sympathetic  
ear to their  
patients while  
keeping them  
company on their  
final journeys*



**T**HEY ARE NOT healthcare professionals but they make patients feel better; they do not know how to administer medication, but they are their charges' "miracle drug".

They are Hospice Ambassadors, "angels" who lessen the physical pain and mental anguish of terminal cancer patients by providing them with emotional counselling and spiritual care.

Funded by the Li Ka Shing Foundation's Heart of Gold Hospice Programme, day care hospice centres were set up in Hong Kong's eight major public hospitals last year. At the same time, a team of Hospice Ambassadors was formed to tend to the needs of the terminally ill, ably assisted by 40 members of Hutchison Whampoa Limited's (HWL) Volunteer Team who lend valuable support to those in need.

Each year more than 10,000 people in Hong Kong die of

## HEARTS OF GOLD

**A**CCORDING TO Dr Anne W M Lee, head of the Department of Clinical Oncology at Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital, plans for opening a day-care hospice centre began in October 2007 and the centre finally opened in August this year. The establishment of this centre involved a number of departments in the hospital, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, nutritionists and volunteers.

"The centre organises various activities such as tai chi sessions, aromatherapy courses, cooking classes and birthday parties," said Dr Lee. "The aim is to relax the patients' minds and lift their spirits. We put notices in the newspapers to recruit more volunteers. We managed to recruit more than 70. As long as you have a willing heart, whether you are a homemaker, a cook or a white-collared worker, you can join us."

Before the HWL Volunteer Team members could serve at the hospice, they had to undergo a training course given by the hospital to learn about the principles of hospice volunteer service and the scope of their work. They also learnt about caring for cancer patients and the attitudes they had to adopt. To date they have organised two activities: a birthday party in the hospital for patients and their families, and a Mid-Autumn Festival party.

Alice Tang of the A S Watson Group is a group leader of the HWL Volunteer Team's Palliative Care Services Group. "Allowing patients and their families to forget their physical and emotional pain for just a few hours. Allowing them to enjoy the activities cheerfully, basking in the warmth of human kindness. That is something we find very meaningful," she said.

The volunteers provide non-therapeutic support. This involves chatting with patients, accompanying them on visits to the doctor and taking part in activities with them. These simple acts of kindness may seem trivial but they help patients forget their worries temporarily.

"A volunteer once told me that the reason why the food prepared by Dae Jang Geum (the protagonist in the Korean television drama series *A Jewel in the Palace*) was exceptionally good was because she had put her heart and soul into her cooking. It was the same dedication as that of the volunteers," said Dr Lee.

She said that although the food prepared by the volunteers might not be the same as those served in hotels, they put their hearts and souls into it – something that is deeply appreciated by the patients.





## HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED

**A**LTHOUGH Hong Kong has one of the best public healthcare systems in the world, it lacks a palliative care service. For this reason, the Li Ka Shing Foundation launched the “Heart of Gold” Hospice Programme in Hong Kong.

In 1998, the Foundation made a donation to the First Affiliated Hospital of the Shantou University Medical College to set up the first free hospice on the mainland to assist financially strapped patients with terminal cancer. The hospice service programme now operates nationwide, benefiting more than 70,000 patients in 28 hospices.

In October last year, the Heart of Gold programme was expanded to include Hong Kong. The Foundation worked with the territory’s Hospital Authority to promote the Hospice Service Programme in public hospitals. The programme has now expanded to cover the whole of Hong Kong and, so far, eight day-care hospice centres have been set up.

To date, the Foundation’s total contributions to this programme in the Mainland and Hong Kong exceeds HKD240 million.

cancer. Many have to endure levels of physical pain and emotional strain that are difficult for families and friends to understand. Angela Lau does – she has had cancer.

Angela became a Hospice Ambassador at the Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital three years ago after retiring from the civil service. Then she discovered that fate had handed her an even greater challenge – she was to become a patient at the same hospital where she was doing volunteer work.

“In December last year, I got Stage II breast cancer,” she said. “I could not accept the reversal of roles. My emotions were on a roller-coaster ride. The therapy was a long and painful journey.”

Despite the surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment, she faced those difficult times with optimism. “There were certain advantages in being a patient. I could behave like a spoilt child. I had always taken care of others and now it was the time to give myself a treat,” she said with a chuckle. Now, as a former patient, she has a complete understanding of how patients feel. For example, those receiving chemotherapy suffer from mouth sores, their sense of taste is altered and they can become irritable.

The Hospice Programme features important elements of modern cancer therapy. From the moment patients are diagnosed with terminal cancer, their physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs are all taken care of. Volunteers who take on the role of a “spiritual friend”, a comforter and supporter to the patient, are an indispensable part of hospice care.

### Let your feelings flow

Human beings have no control over when they die, but they can choose how they die. One of the key concepts of palliative care is allowing patients to go through the final stages of their lives in peace and with dignity. Fiona Yu, another volunteer at the Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital’s day care hospice centre, has a profound understanding of this concept.



Fiona used to work in the government’s Judiciary Department. Court work was stressful and although her body was already sending out warning signs, she did not leave her job until her mother, who was over 90, was diagnosed with bowel cancer. “If I could not be by her side on her final journey, I would live to regret it,” Fiona said. In the last nine months of her mother’s life, Fiona was with her every day.

Mother and daughter talked about all sorts of things; they were even comfortable talking about death. Her mother gave detailed instructions about the kind of final rites she wanted and what she wanted to wear at her own funeral. “I came to the realisation that we ought to make good use of the time that is left to have good conversations with the person who is dying. Only then would there be no regrets when the time comes, both for the living and the dead,” she said.

After her mother passed away, Fiona began work as a Hospice Ambassador and it was then that she came to the conclusion that the Chinese are too emotionally reserved, which impedes their abilities to communicate with one another.

“We are very mean to our families. We only lose our tempers with those who are closest to us,” Fiona observed. “When members of our families help us, we seldom thank them because we

**Day-care centres organise a variety of activities to help patients relax and lift their spirits.**  
*Right: Dr Anne Lee talks to a volunteer.*



feel that there is no need to be too polite to one's family?"

She constantly reminds herself to treasure every person, every experience and every object. She also hopes terminal cancer patients and their families will open their hearts to one another through their participation in the activities held in the centre.

"Although the patients are sick, they have the opportunity to put the rest of their lives in order. There are many who don't even have a chance to do that," Fiona said. "I hope I can help the patients make the most of their remaining time on earth."

Fiona's goal is also the key principle of hospice care. If we are able to walk towards the end of our lives at peace with ourselves and the world, then we have found true happiness!



*One of the key concepts of palliative care is allowing patients to go through the final stage of their lives in peace and with dignity*

