

# Healthcare for the later stage of life



Dr Tay Hui Sian.

WHILE it is widely known that geriatricians attend to older patients, many people may not truly understand the need for specialists within this medical field and how treatment for the elderly can differ from that for younger adults. Dr Tay Hui Sian, consultant physician in geriatric and general internal medicine at Pantai Hospital Ayer Keroh, explains that geriatricians have expertise in preventing, diagnosing and treating the specific medical and health conditions that affect older people as they age.

As they get older, adults will experience multiple physical changes to their bodies, either because of ageing or from conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and more. Hence, when treating an older patient, geriatricians need to take these aspects into consideration.

“Just as parents bring children to paediatricians because of their specialised knowledge, people go to geriatricians to take advantage of the specialised, advanced care available for older adults,” she says. Dr Tay notes that there are certain factors that may cause difficulties in diagnosing older patients:

- Delay in presentation or understating of symptoms
- Assumption that a medical condition is a natural ageing process
- Communication problems between patients with caretakers and doctors
- Deafness, confusion, dysphasia (problems with language) and dysarthria (problems with speech)
- Impaired memory
- Examination hampered by restlessness or fatigue
- Failure to fully disclose results of previous physical findings, investigations and medications
- Change in significance of physical findings and results of investigations, such as when an abnormal liver function test might indicate fatty liver in younger people, but liver cancer in older people
- Atypical disease presentations, such as when an infection presents as falling or confusion instead of typical symptoms like coughing, pain when urinating or fever
- Patients have multiple medical

conditions, multiple causes for each condition and the need for multiple medications

Hence, geriatricians are trained to carry out comprehensive geriatric assessments before determining diagnoses for older patients. Dr Tay illustrates the process geriatricians use to assess and manage illness in older people.

“First, we need to determine what the problems are. In general, older patients tend to have multiple medical problems and multiple health domains being affected at the same time. After confirming these particulars, geriatricians will then determine if the medical condition can be reversed or improved.”

She states that the treatment of an older

patient is not always carried out by only one doctor; it involves a multidisciplinary team where necessary.

## Care for prolonged health and independence

Dr Tay opines that having an elderly person at home is akin to having a living gold treasure, hence, that person deserves the best care as he ages. Because of this, geriatricians pay more attention to patients' goals, wishes and desired quality of life, and create person-centred care plans with patients and families.

Palliative and end-of-life care is also part of a geriatrician's scope of expertise. Dr Tay says, “We emphasise the importance of



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maintaining independent living, social support, healthy ageing and preventative care, and thus strive to provide well-designed, person-centred care with a holistic approach.”

■ For more information, call 06-231 9999 (ext. 2138).

## Should I see a geriatrician?

While geriatricians look after the well-being of older patients, not every elderly person needs to see a geriatrician. Dr Tay recommends older patients to visit a geriatrician if they:

- Suffer from multiple medical conditions
- Find that treatment for one medical condition negatively affects a second condition
- Take multiple medications
- Have a disease associated with ageing, such as memory loss, falling, balancing problems, poor mobility, osteoporosis and more
- Experience functional decline, frailty or decrease in mobility

● Are hospitalised, because older people have different patterns in disease presentation, slower response to treatment and requirements for rehabilitation or social support

● Are having or have had surgery, because outcomes can be optimised to reduce complications and the geriatrician who can educate the patient's loved ones are well informed to make decisions on the methods of treatment

She adds that other benefits of seeing a geriatrician include reduction in hospital readmissions, mortality, length of stay, risk of functional decline and provision of long-term care needs.