



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

**DocTalk**

# Guidance and support key to beating cancer in old age

No one should be deemed too frail for treatment based on their chronological age alone



**Angela Pang**

Madam Ng (not her real name), 82, first felt a lump the size of a golf ball in her left breast about six years ago.

It took her a year before she sought medical help. And when a cancer specialist diagnosed her with early-stage breast cancer, she was devastated.

She debated whether she should, at her age, undergo the recommended treatment of surgery, followed by chemotherapy and hormonal therapy.

She was otherwise a very fit and active lady who exercised daily and participated in volunteer work.

Fortunately, Madam Ng made the right decision and chose to undergo treatment, with the support of her close-knit family and medical team.

It has been five years since the treatment and today, she remains cancer-free and is planning her next family holiday.

Cancer in the elderly is common and will become more so. More than 20 per cent of our local population will be above the age of 65 by 2030 and considered "geriatric", based on the World Health Organisation's definition of an older person.

Chronic illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases and stroke become increasingly common with age; and every four out of five people in the geriatric population will have one or more of these chronic illnesses.

These are often associated with significant morbidity and death.

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Singapore and evidence has shown that the risk of developing cancer increases with age. In the United States, about 60 per cent of patients who developed cancer were 65 and older.

However, being diagnosed with cancer need not be a death

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sentence, even for elderly patients, and particularly for individuals who are found to have early-stage cancer.

**ELDERLY PEOPLE CAN TOLERATE CANCER TREATMENT**

We expect to see more patients like Madam Ng who are able to receive and tolerate the appropriate cancer treatment, even in their old age.

All they require is a dedicated team to guide them and family members to support them through their cancer journey.

Each patient's journey starts from the time of diagnosis. Healthcare professionals looking after elderly cancer patients will have to pay special attention to their unique concerns, such as decreased organ reserves, other medical problems they have and functional impairments, as compared with younger patients.

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undergoing cancer treatment.

However, these issues should not preclude older adults from receiving treatment. Instead, their treatment can be tailored, taking into account their needs and condition.

In view of the increasing number of elderly cancer patients in Singapore, the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore plans to pilot a new clinic designed for elderly cancer patients in the second half of this year.

Unlike a regular cancer clinic, the Geriatric Oncology Clinic offers every elderly cancer patient a comprehensive geriatric

assessment that pays careful attention to his physical and mental function, social situation, other medical problems and nutritional status.

The treating physicians can then use the additional information to plan the treatment for each patient and recommend other interventions to optimise the patient's functional and nutritional status during the course of his cancer treatment.

This is key to tailoring holistic treatment plans that are aimed at maintaining the patients' quality of life, as well as supporting their caregivers during the cancer journey. A geriatric oncology team of doctors, nurses, therapists, pharmacists and social workers will also guide the patients and their caregivers through their journey.

No one should be deemed too frail for cancer treatment based on their chronological age alone.

angela\_pang@nuhs.edu.sg

• Angela Pang is a medical oncology consultant at the department of haematology-oncology at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore.