

New Jurong hospital points way to total patient care

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An artist's impression of a subsidised ward at Jurong General Hospital, which will open in 2014. It will be run almost as one with a community facility next door, aiming to allow total oversight of patient health from admission to discharge and follow-up care. -- PHOTO: JURONG GENERAL HOSPITAL

The Jurong General Hospital (JGH) will give new meaning to integrated patient care when it opens in 2014.

A community hospital next door to it, to be run by the voluntary welfare organisation St Luke's, will effectively be an extension of it: They will share doctors, patient medical records, computer systems and a staff training programme.

The hospitals, with 700 and 200 beds respectively, will be run almost as one. It distinguishes this 'marriage' from current general hospital-community hospital pairings in which the two parties just work closely together.

This twinning of an acute hospital with a community hospital is a key part of the Government's strategy to keep health care affordable as the population here ages.

The elderly, often on long-term medication for multiple problems, need frequent hospitalisation and usually many weeks of recuperation. As the recovery period often need not be spent in an acute hospital, moving them to community hospitals will help keep their medical bills lower.

This dovetailing was alluded to by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech, when he spoke of patients getting 'fast medicine' such as surgery at a general hospital, followed by 'slow medicine' or recuperation and rehabilitation at

a community hospital.

'This way, patients get more appropriate care, save money, and we also free up beds for acute cases,' he said.

A community hospital costs a fifth of what it takes to build a general hospital. It is also much cheaper to run, since it caters to recovering patients rather than those needing acute care.

These cost savings can be passed on to patients.

Many chronically ill patients now spend more days in a general hospital than they need, given that it is a hassle to find them a bed in a community hospital and then have them moved there by ambulance, especially if it is for just a few more days.

Pairing general hospitals with community hospitals started four years ago with the opening of St Andrew's Community Hospital next to Changi General Hospital.

Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) now has Ren Ci next door, and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, to open in Yishun next year, will have a 200-bed community hospital nearby.

JGH takes the concept of integrated health care forward in another sense: Beyond the two hospitals, patient care will also include three polyclinics, six nursing homes and general practitioners willing to be part of this 'complete care'.

Its chief executive officer Foo Hee Jug, noting the highly fragmented nature of patient care now, said each institution discharges the patient to the next, be it a community hospital, nursing home or the patient's own home.

'Nobody is in full control of the entire journey,' he added.

He wants to give patients a proper care path all the way through, including any follow-up care they may need from their family doctor.

This vision of total care has stirred up interest and made it easier for him to recruit the people he will need. His 200 doctors and 600 nurses will come from hospitals across the island.

Dr Cheah Wei Keat, who heads general surgery at the National University Hospital and who has accepted the position as head of JGH's medical board, said he was 'very excited' by the idea of fully integrated patient care.

Ms Kuttiammal Sundarasan, with 30 years in nursing under her belt, leaves Singapore General Hospital

to become director of nursing, while Dr Gamaliel Tan leaves TTSH to head orthopaedic surgery.

Although JGH will not open till 2014, the team must be in place to take over the running of Alexandra Hospital from March, when Alexandra's team moves over to the Yishun hospital.

Mr Foo is now overseeing the building of the community hospital and looking into the best location for it within the 5.5ha set aside for the two institutions.

JGH will leverage on St Luke's strength, which is its excellent pastoral care and huge community outreach. St Luke's has many volunteers who cheer up in-patients and who help with home-care services when these patients are discharged.

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TIGHTER INTEGRATION

'Currently, community hospitals are already receiving medical support from general hospitals. Going forward, the Ministry of Health sees the level of integration between general hospitals and community hospitals increasing as they work together to provide more seamless care. There will be more joint manpower development and deployment between general hospitals and community hospitals. However, there is no single mould for all community hospitals. Some may focus more on rehabilitation, while others may be able to do more sub-acute care.'

A Ministry of Health spokesman

Note: Singapore has seven community hospitals with a total of 822 beds. Two 200-bed community hospitals will come up - in Yishun in 2013, and in Jurong in 2015.