ISSUE 26.2024

National Healthcare Group
POLYCLINICS

Transforming PRIMARY CARE

UP CLOSE WITH
A SENIOR CARE COORDINATOR FROM NHG POLYCLINICS' FRAILTY PROGRAMME

IN AND AROUND
VISIT BY NEW ZEALAND'S HEALTH MINISTER, NUS MEDICINE APPRECIATION FOR CLINICAL EDUCATORS AWARD, AND MORE



PREVENTING AND REVERSING FRAILTY

As Singapore's population ages, frailty is emerging as a public health challenge. NHG Polyclinics' Frailty Programme proactively prevents and reverses this condition.

2024 APEX® AWARDS FOR PUBLICATION EXCELLENCE



PREVENTING AND REVERSING FRAILTY

Frailty is associated with a higher prevalence of adverse health outcomes. Our latest issue of *Transforming Primary Care* shines a spotlight on the National Healthcare Group (NHG) Polyclinics' Frailty Programme, which is designed to prevent and reverse frailty in Singapore's ageing population. With seniors aged 65 and above expected to number over 900,000 by 2030 — and studies showing that at least 35 per cent of our senior population is pre-frail or frail — this initiative is both opportune and essential. Since its inception in June 2022, the Frailty Programme has demonstrated remarkable success in helping seniors maintain independence and improve their quality of life.

Read our *Cover Story*, 'Preventing and Reversing Frailty for Healthy Ageing', to find out how this multi-faceted approach prioritises early detection and proactive intervention through frailty screening, participation in community exercise programmes and medication deprescribing. The Frailty Programme highlights the transformative impact of personalised guidance and lifestyle modifications, which have positively influenced the physical function and chronic illness outcomes of nearly 3,600 seniors who received interventions. This attests to the strength of NHG Polyclinics' collaborative team-based care model, demonstrating how Care Coordinators, Family Physicians, clinical pharmacists and community partners come together to empower patients with the knowledge and resources to stay active and independent.

In *Up Close With*, we take a closer look at this personalised approach through the perspective of Senior Care Coordinator Ms Doreen Chan. Passionate about promoting preventive health, Ms Chan plays an instrumental role in helping patients combat frailty through timely screening and ensures that they have access to multidisciplinary care team support for better detection, prevention and management of their chronic condition.

As the elderly population grows, so does the importance of addressing the unique health challenges that come with ageing. Together, with the support of healthcare professionals, families and the broader community, we can make a meaningful and lasting difference in the lives of our senior patients, enabling them to age gracefully, with resilience and purpose.

The Editorial Team

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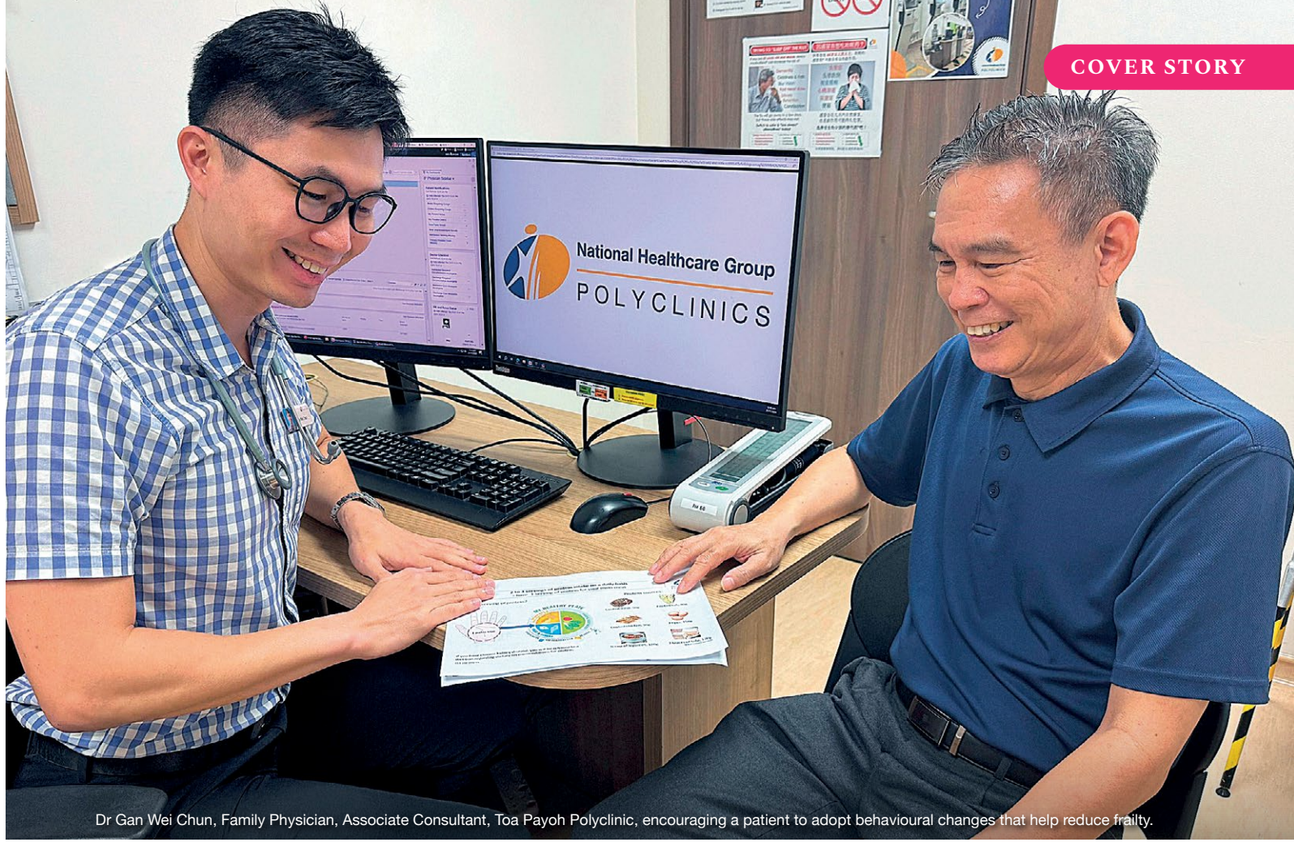
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Dr Gan Wei Chun, Family Physician, Associate Consultant, Toa Payoh Polyclinic, encouraging a patient to adopt behavioural changes that help reduce frailty.

PREVENTING AND REVERSING FRAILTY FOR HEALTHY AGEING

As Singapore's population ages, frailty is emerging as a public health challenge that affects the quality of life in seniors. National Healthcare Group (NHG) Polyclinics' comprehensive Frailty Programme proactively prevents, reverses and manages this rising concern.

For 75-year-old Ms Doris Yam, staying active has always been a priority. However, after undergoing a double total knee replacement, the retired secretary began to notice a decline in her strength, energy and movement. When she was identified as living with very mild frailty during an appointment visit to an NHG Polyclinic, she was determined to take action and improve her condition.

Ms Yam is among the 3,600 seniors who have been offered interventions as part of NHG Polyclinics' Frailty Programme. Under this initiative, she receives personalised guidance and support, and was encouraged by the team managing her health to start using the Healthy 365 app to join community exercise classes such as Zumba and low-impact aerobics. Her commitment to achieving her health goals has since paid off. On top of feeling more energised, she is also managing her diabetes better, with better blood sugar control. With improved physical function, she is looking forward to a trip to Morocco with her friends.

A GROWING CONCERN

Ms Yam's experience is one example of the health issues encompassed within the broader healthcare landscape in Singapore, where frailty is becoming an increasing and significant concern. According to the National Frailty Strategy Policy Report by the Ministry of Health, the number of seniors aged



65 years and above will surge from 510,000 in 2017 to over 900,000 in 2030, representing one in four Singaporeans[1]. Local studies have found that at least 30 per cent of the senior population were pre-frail while 5 per cent were frail[2].

The effects of frailty extend beyond physical weakness. Reduced mobility from physical limitations may affect the activities of daily living, and lead to decreased social participation and increased reliance on caregivers. This cascade of challenges can dramatically impact a senior's independence and overall well-being. A serious consequence is the increased risk of falls, the leading cause of injury among seniors in Singapore. A study[3] showed that one in three persons aged 65 and above would have experienced a fall at least once within a year, with the risk increasing to one in two for those aged 80 and above.

A MULTI-FACETED APPROACH

Launched in June 2022, NHG Polyclinics' Frailty Programme seeks to help patients aged 65 and older maintain independence and prevent frailty progression through three key components — frailty intervention, referral to community exercise programmes, and the tapering off or stopping of medication.

Early detection is conducted using an internationally recognised Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS), as well as using hand grip strength to assess muscle function and overall physical capability. Hand grip strength enables patients to better understand their frailty condition in comparison to the general population and the significance of adopting behavioural changes.

The initial assessment is carried out by the polyclinic's Care Coordinator, who screens patients to facilitate the provision and coordination of comprehensive care. During the session, the Care Coordinator provides educational materials and lifestyle advice on ageing well, including guidance on resistance exercises, high-protein diets and fall prevention. Should patients express interest in the community exercise programmes shared by the Care Coordinator, this is then conveyed to the Family Physician who will review their records to ensure they are medically fit for participation, before referring them to the NHG Community Health Teams (CHTs). From there, the CHTs recommend appropriate exercise programmes and activities that align with patients' preferences, CFS score and location, enabling greater participation.



Senior Care Coordinator Ms Doreen Chan assessing Ms Doris Yam's hand grip strength using a dynamometer.

For seniors on multiple medications and at a higher risk of adverse events due to medication side effects, medication deprescribing may be required. High doses of diabetes mellitus medications, for instance, could result in an increased incidence of hypoglycaemia and a higher risk of falls. That is where clinical pharmacists come in under the Frailty Programme, to review and recommend adjustments to the patients' medication plans which are further reviewed by the Family Physician. If the HbA1c level (the average blood sugar level over the last three months) of an elderly patient on multiple diabetes medications is below 6.5 per cent, the clinical pharmacist steps in for medication deprescribing.

SUPPORTING PATIENTS TOWARDS SUCCESS

Ms Yeo Loo See, Deputy Director of Nursing Services at NHG Polyclinics, emphasises the crucial role of Care Coordinators in the programme's success. To equip them with necessary skills and resources for frailty screening and assessment, Care Coordinators undergo a comprehensive two-month training programme, including engagement through role-play. They also have the opportunity to participate in a frailty management workshop run by the Primary Care Academy to hone their knowledge. "Our Care Coordinators are primarily responsible for preventive care," Ms Yeo highlights. "They have been upskilled to assist in the Frailty Programme, building trust and rapport between the care team and patients."



Dr David Ng, Family Physician, Senior Consultant and Deputy Director of Clinical Services at NHG Polyclinics, Lead of the Frailty Programme, explains more about the programme in a briefing.

Apart from empowering patients to lead healthier and more productive lives in their old age, the Care Coordinator continues to assess the patients' parameters when they return to the polyclinic for their chronic follow-up appointments every year. Similarly, Family Physicians continue to provide appropriate care to patients for their overall health conditions during these follow-ups.

Since its pilot in 2020, the Frailty Programme has shown promising outcomes. From November 2020 to September 2024, over 7,100 patients were screened, with nearly 3,600 receiving interventions to prevent the onset of frailty or reverse the process. At the 12-month follow-up, around 48 per cent of patients who were managing well (CFS score 3) and 31 per cent of patients with mild frailty (CFS score 4) demonstrated enhanced hand grip strength. Additionally, the CFS scores improved for 16 per cent of patients with CFS score 3, and 31 per cent of patients with CFS score 4.

Dr David Ng, Family Physician, Senior Consultant and Deputy Director of Clinical Services at NHG Polyclinics and Lead of the Frailty Programme, attributed these improvements to multidisciplinary efforts. "In the pilot phase, we found that 55 per cent of the patients screened belonged to CFS 3 and 4, highlighting an opportunity for us to positively impact population health outcomes. Both groups consist of independent individuals who are physically inactive or showing early signs of frailty such as slow gait," he explains, adding that the close collaboration between care team members — including doctors, Care Coordinators and clinical pharmacists — enabled NHG Polyclinics to successfully improve frailty outcomes for these seniors.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Currently running at Toa Payoh, Ang Mo Kio, and Hougang Polyclinics, the Frailty Programme will be expanded to all NHG Polyclinics in the central region by the end of 2025. This expansion will help more seniors like Ms Yam maintain their overall ability to perform daily tasks and quality of life.

Through this comprehensive approach to frailty prevention and management, NHG Polyclinics is doing more than just treating a condition — it is helping seniors to stay active and independent, and supporting their dignity and zest for life well into their golden years.

TAILORED INTERVENTIONS USING THE CLINICAL FRAILTY SCALE

The Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS) is a tool used to assess frailty in elderly patients, ranging from 1 (Very Fit) to 9 (Terminally Ill). NHG Polyclinics' Frailty Programme focuses on:

- **CFS 3 - Managing Well:** People whose medical problems are well-controlled but are often not regularly active beyond routine walking.
- **CFS 4 - Living with Very Mild Frailty:** People who are not dependent on others for daily help, but often have symptoms that limit activities. Common complaints include being slower and/or being tired during the day.

Early intervention at these stages has shown the best potential for preventing frailty progression and maintaining independence. Patients who have CFS score of 1 or 2 are generally fit, and NHG Polyclinics' care team will continue to provide them with educational materials and lifestyle advice relevant to their conditions. Those identified with a CFS score of 5 or higher have difficulties with daily activities, hence requiring closer supervision and more intensive training to achieve frailty reversal. NHG Polyclinics continues to explore the goals of care and implementation of suitable frailty interventions for these patients.



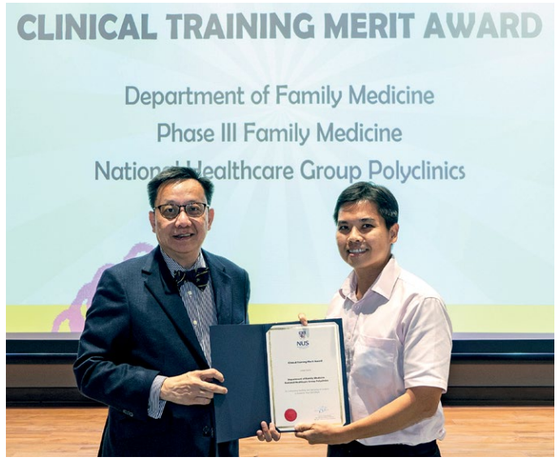
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VISIT BY NEW ZEALAND'S HEALTH MINISTER

NHG Polyclinics hosted a senior healthcare delegation from New Zealand, comprising Dr Shane Reti, Minister of Health of New Zealand; Dr Diana Sarfati, Director-General of Health; Mr Jonathan Franklin, Senior Ministerial Advisor; and Mr Keith Conway, Deputy High Commissioner, New Zealand High Commission, at Kallang Polyclinic on 23 October 2024. Dr Valerie Teo, Head, Kallang Polyclinic, led the delegates on a polyclinic tour centred on managing non-communicable diseases and modifiable behavioural factors. The NHG Polyclinics' senior management team also shared with the New Zealand delegates about primary care services at NHG Polyclinics, and technology innovations to empower patients such as the Primary Tech-Enhanced Care (PTEC) programme.





NUS MEDICINE APPRECIATION FOR CLINICAL EDUCATORS AWARD

Awarded by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Medicine Dean's office, the annual NUS Medicine Appreciation for Clinical Educators (NUSMedACE) Award recognises clinical educators for their efforts to teaching excellence. At the NUSMedACE award ceremony for the National Healthcare Group on 15 October 2024, Dr Lawrence Wu, Family Physician, Associate Consultant, Khatib Polyclinic; and Dr Gan Wei Chun, Family Physician, Associate Consultant, Toa Payoh Polyclinic, received the Dean's Award for Teaching Excellence. Dr Liu Changwei, Family Physician, Consultant and Deputy Head, Geylang Polyclinic, represented NHG Polyclinics in receiving the Clinical Training Merit Award (Department Award).

EMPOWERING SENIORS THE PCA WAY

From July to September 2024, the Primary Care Academy (PCA), in partnership with NTUC Health and supported by the Council for Third Age, conducted a series of health talks to empower older adults in Active Ageing Centres across Singapore. Close to 30 individuals attended each session to learn about topics such as managing pain and insomnia and understanding the ageing process. The sessions, which were well received, helped to enhance health literacy and contribute towards the well-being of seniors in the community.

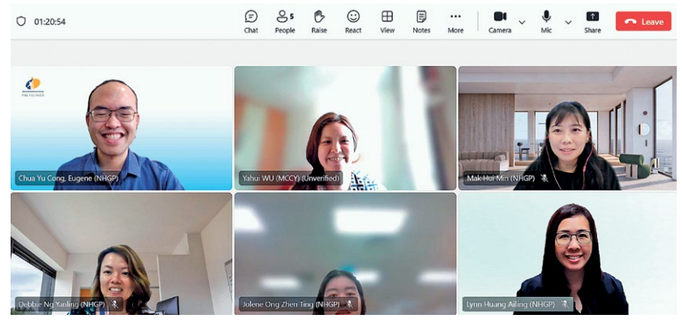




ANTI-SCAM ROADSHOW AT BUKIT CANBERRA

A joint effort between Sembawang Polyclinic, the Singapore Police Force and Sport Singapore, the Anti-Scam Roadshow at Bukit Canberra on 3 November 2024 aimed to promote scam awareness and emotional wellness. Mr Tan Ee Xuen, Psychologist, Sembawang Polyclinic, was invited to speak about how to 'Manage Your Stress to Respond Better to Potential Scams', equipping participants with the knowledge to reduce vulnerability to scams by responding to stressful situations calmly and rationally. Other highlights of the roadshow included interactive booths, a children's activity area and a showcase of police vehicles.

DIALOGUE WITH MCCY



NHG Polyclinics' ALERT (AdoLescent Evaluation and Rapid Treatment of Mental Health) team had a dialogue session with the Youth Division of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) on 5 November 2024. During the meeting, the team highlighted NHG Polyclinics' commitment to primary care mental health, sharing about its ALERT programme, Health and Mind Service, and postnatal depression screening. The team heard from MCCY on national initiatives to empower and inspire youths. The session strengthened both parties' commitment to collaborative efforts to foster resilience among youths in Singapore.

NTU LKCMEDICINE SPECIAL RECOGNITION AWARD

On 11 November 2024, the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKCMedicine) Special Recognition Award AY2023-24 honoured NHG Polyclinics staff for their efforts in nurturing and supporting LKCMedicine students. Dr Ong Sin Hwee, Family Physician, Associate Consultant, Geylang Polyclinic; Dr Leong Jia Li Jaylyn, Family Physician, Hougang Polyclinic; and Dr Andrew Lee Yew Meng, Family Physician, Associate Consultant, Yishun Polyclinic were among the award recipients.





FIGHTING FRAILTY

As a Senior Care Coordinator at Toa Payoh Polyclinic, **Ms Doreen Chan** supports seniors in addressing their frailty conditions and the challenges they face. Through timely screening and multidisciplinary interventions, she empowers her patients to live more active, fulfilling lives.



Why did you choose to become a Care Coordinator? Before I took on this role, I was a Senior Patient Service Associate and my job was mainly administrative. In 2022, I began training as a Care Coordinator for NHG Polyclinics' Frailty Programme and have been doing this since. The transition to take up this new challenge was driven by my passion to advocate for preventive health and promote healthy living. Working in this role has proven immensely fulfilling, as it allows me to gain invaluable experience and insights, which enriches my professional growth and ability to make a positive impact on patients' lives.

What are the key functions of a Care Coordinator? In my role, I support my care team by promoting preventive health to patients, which includes emphasising the importance of regular health screenings and vaccinations, and providing advice on maintaining a healthy lifestyle. I was honoured to be selected as the first few to be trained in performing frailty screening using the Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS) tool. For patients identified as generally fit, managing well or living with very mild frailty, I measure their hand grip strength, and provide pamphlets for doing resistance exercises to build strength and adopting high-protein diets to support muscle health.

How does the Frailty Programme directly address the rising challenges associated with frailty? Frailty is a public health concern as it increases the risk of adverse outcomes like falls, hospitalisations and even mortality. By combining proactive screening and timely interventions, NHG Polyclinics' Frailty Programme takes a multidisciplinary approach in tackling frailty, ensuring that all aspects of patients' health — physical, mental and social — are addressed effectively. Patients aged 65 years and older are systematically screened yearly using the CFS and hand grip strength assessment, even if they have no active disease symptoms or when their chronic conditions are well-managed. Through early detection, the care team identifies signs of frailty before it progresses, enabling interventions that enhance patients' health significantly and positively. For patients identified to have frailty, the care team will promptly refer them to the community exercise programmes. This encourages the seniors to start on the exercise programmes, along with education on nutritional support and fall prevention from the Care Coordinator.

Share an inspiring or memorable experience in your work that has continued to motivate you. One such experience involved an elderly patient who came for preventive health screening. In the midst of my engagement with her, she suddenly broke down, appearing extremely sad and helpless. Sensing that she needed more help, I immediately referred her to my nurse for depression screening. Over time, the attention paid to her health needs led to an improvement in her well-being, and she expressed gratitude for the support she received. This was one of many experiences that taught me the importance of being supportive, and inspired me to assist every patient with empathy.

"NHG Polyclinics' Frailty Programme takes a multidisciplinary approach in tackling frailty, ensuring that all aspects of patients' health — physical, mental and social — are addressed effectively.

