

Dorothy Yiu



A Volunteer with Heart *A volunteer passionate about educating the Chinese community*

Dorothy Yiu is a volunteer with heart. She began working with not-for-profit organisation, Chinese Cancer and Chronic Illness Society of Victoria more than 25 years ago, where she has been supporting Chinese patients living with cancer or a chronic illness.

She began as a volunteer and remains a volunteer to this day. For more than two decades she has been visiting palliative care patients either in their own home or in a hospice.

The Chinese Cancer and Chronic Illness Society is based in Box Hill and provides patients with psycho, social, and practical support such as transport and equipment loans to Chinese speaking people who are affected by cancer and other chronic illnesses such as dementia and Parkinson's Disease.

The Society also run support groups where members support each other and foster a sense of hope. Counselling and case management are also offered to individual clients to help them cope with their illness and improve their sense of wellbeing.

“At the Society, we work hard to educate our patients on palliative care and promote end of life care planning. Awareness and education are key because the uptake of palliative care within the Chinese community remains very low,” said Ms Yiu.

“The reason for this is that many of the people we look after don’t speak English, so they don’t understand what palliative care is. Secondly, in the Chinese culture, death is regarded as a negative event and the Chinese believe in preserving and prolonging life, so people within the community don’t want to talk about death and dying.

“The Chinese community don’t like talking about death and dying, but when things happen they often get stuck, because they haven’t talked about it before and they don’t know where to start.

“Furthermore, the families – particularly the children – don’t know how to look after their dying parents and it’s very hard. In the Chinese culture, we believe longevity is a blessing, so children feel it’s their duty to prolong the life of their parents for as long as possible despite quality of life.

“We quickly realised that a lot of people within the Chinese community don’t know much at all about palliative care – many don’t even know what it is. They are reluctant to talk about the topic because they think it signals the end, and many don’t want to go to the hospice to die.

“I’ve come across many cases where a potential patient didn’t want to go to the hospice, and this created tension within families. I remember I had to sit down with a particular family, because they just couldn’t decide what to do. I had to explain to the patient that the hospice was a safe place where they would be taken care of and looked after by experts including doctors and nurses, and the patient finally agreed to go.

“There have been many of these stories during the two decades that I have been with the Society and to me, this work is rewarding because I know the patient will be well looked after,” she said.

The Chinese Cancer and Chronic Illness Society has been doing a lot of educational workshops and seminars in Mandarin and Cantonese to educate patients and their families to ensure they don’t miss out on much needed care.

“In addition to workshop and webinars, we also use creative tools and mediums to raise awareness and education of palliative care. We once put on a drama to act out the meaning of palliative and we also created videos including a Chinese animation around life care planning, which we found very effective,” said Ms Yiu.

“A few years ago, we also published a bi-lingual booklet called ‘Farewell Wishes’. These are just some of the ways we have helped our community navigate a very complex situation and to help them better understand palliative care and its benefits.

“My work is truly rewarding. There have been a lot of memorable moments during my time at the Society. On a few occasions, I have stayed with families in the hospice when the patient was dying or had just passed away. On one occasion, the wife of a patient was extremely distressed, so I stayed with her while she waited for her children to arrive.

“I have been supporting doctors and nurses throughout my career. I remember one of the doctors called me. She said she couldn’t get her patient to take their medication, so I was asked to step in and help. Understanding your patient is very important and taking the time to explain the process in more detail in a culturally appropriate way also helps. In my experience, quite a lot of people in the Chinese community refuse to take painkillers because many believe it’s not good for their health.

Dorothy said she is proud of the work she has done over the last 25 years. “I’m particularly pleased with my work and persistence in supporting cancer patients for more than quarter of a century. I’ve looked after hundreds and hundreds of patients and I’ve come across some really amazing people during my time.”

“I would really encourage everybody to consider palliative care and end of life planning when the time comes. This helps you with your end of life wishes and gives you and your family peace of mind.”

“Palliative Care Victoria is such an important organisation. We need to continue to raise awareness of palliative care not just within the Chinese community, but more broadly across Victoria. Palliative care is about quality care and human dignity. We don’t want to suffer at the very last moment. We all want to die peacefully. Palliative care is a very useful service for people living with a life limiting illness,” Ms Yiu said.

“45 years after my brother died, my mum died in the same house, however her death was different. We had a local palliative care service with a doctor who assessed my mum and prescribed the medication needed for symptoms and comfort. There were also nurses who visited, and bereavement support available. This difference in end-of-life care showcases the importance of palliative care in Victoria.”