

Taking Palliative Care to Every Malaysian

By Dr. Ednin Hamzah, CEO of Hospis Malaysia

As Malaysia approaches ageing nation status by 2030, the need for equitable palliative care is more urgent than ever. By then, palliative care cases are expected to reach 240,000 – a 140% increase from 2014. Currently, 100,000 people suffer serious health-related issues annually, a figure set to more than double in five years, yet only 10% receive adequate care. Bridging this gap requires better accessibility, health literacy, and advocacy at all levels of society.

Despite its critical role in healthcare, many Malaysians remain unaware of palliative care – what it is, who needs it, where to seek it, and how to advocate for quality services. Misconceptions persist, including the belief that palliative care is only for end-of-life cancer patients or that it is a luxury reserved for the wealthy. Others, on the other hand, assume that only the marginalised should benefit from it.

In reality, palliative care is a fundamental right, not a privilege, and should be available to anyone facing a serious progressive illness, regardless of age, diagnosis, socioeconomic status, or location.

As a prominent provider of palliative care, Hospis Malaysia receives approximately 1,600 referrals annually and actively collaborates with various local and international organisations. In recent years, we have seen a steady rise in non-cancer patients needing palliative care, including those with motor neuron disease, organ failure, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, and dementia. Between 2020 and 2023, our non-cancer referrals rose from 13% of the total number of patients under our care to over 20%, reflecting a growing awareness of palliative care beyond cancer treatment.

In line with the theme of World Hospice and Palliative Care Day 2025 later this year, *"Achieving the Promise – Universal Access to Palliative Care"*, equitable palliative care requires a unified national effort from the government, care providers, NGOs, and the public. In Malaysia, achieving this goal demands structural advancements. Strengthening health policies and empowering communities are vital to driving progress in research, education, training, and

access to essential medicines, ultimately building a robust, integrated healthcare system. To meet future demands, action is needed now. Key priorities include:

- **Igniting a community-driven movement** – Launch nationwide campaigns to raise awareness on health literacy, palliative care, and its early access, empowering Malaysians to advocate for care where they need it.
- **Ensuring data-driven planning and development** – Base palliative care planning, development, and evaluation on patient and caregiver needs, reinforced by data collection and analysis. Evidence-based policies and resource allocation will ensure services effectively address real-world challenges and gaps in care.
- **Strengthening policies, coordination and ethical safeguards** – Improve existing frameworks to ensure consistent, high-quality, person-centred care across hospitals and communities. Foster collaboration among healthcare providers, social workers, and mental health professionals to deliver holistic care for patients and caregivers.
- **Growing community-based services** – Invest in home-based palliative care to ease hospital congestion and support patients where they are most comfortable, usually in their own communities. Seamless delivery is crucial in reducing the need to readmit loved ones back to hospital in every medical emergency.
- **Advancing training and research** – Integrate palliative care into medical and nursing curricula while strengthening research to refine local best practices.
- **Enhancing early integration** – Introduce palliative care alongside curative treatments and train primary care providers for early intervention and wider accessibility.
- **Bridging geographical gaps** – Expand services beyond city centres to ensure equitable access for all.

By working together to implement these critical reforms, Malaysia can move towards a future where every individual facing a serious progressive illness is provided with compassionate and dignified palliative care.

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