

Lilian's caregiving journey - Remembering Mdm Wong

It has been my privilege working with Mdm Wong* and her daughter, Lilian*. I would watch both mother and daughter come through our doors – Lilian wheeling Mdm Wong to the usual table at which Mdm Wong typically sits at. After transferring Mdm Wong to a chair, Lilian would then reach for a storage box which contained Mdm Wong's things – and take out a couple of hand-warmers to keep Mdm Wong's hands warm. She would then get Mdm Wong settled in with a *kopi-o* and some biscuits, before leaving to run her errands.



Mdm Wong was a petite lady - 95 years *young*, and contagiously joyful! She loved music, and never failed to participate enthusiastically in activities at Elder-Centred Programme of Integrated Comprehensive Care (EPICC) – a day programme for frail elderly living in the community. She was also our unofficial ambassador – she always told newcomers how much she enjoyed herself at EPICC, and how great a place EPICC was to her.

As close as their relationship was, Lilian shared that caregiving was not without its ups and downs. There were agitation and frustration. There were fears and tears too. As her social worker, I have shared some emotionally-charged conversations with Lilian on topics of her mother's care, caregiver stress and her future plans. She has had to adjust to her role as a caregiver, leaving her full-time job and taking on part-time work so that she can take care of her mother.

Lilian shared that she felt as if their roles had been reversed and she now cared for her mother in the same way that her mother had once cared for her. Lilian saw to all aspects of Mdm Wong's care – personal hygiene, meals, and ensuring that her mother did her daily exercises. During this time, Mdm Wong's decline in mental health from dementia had also taken its toll on their relationship – Mdm Wong would accuse Lilian of stealing random household items (like brooms and pots). Despite the rigors of work and caregiving, Lilian found solace and self-care in caring for the community cats. She would feed the cats at 10pm nightly, while Mdm Wong was asleep.



Mdm Wong contracted pneumonia and was hospitalized. Lilian shared with me then that although this was not their first scare, it might well be their last. Covid19 and the circuit breaker came like thieves in the night. Many lost – some, like Mdm Wong and Lilian, more than others. Mdm Wong got discharged back home but her condition deteriorated further. She was bedbound, and suffered a loss of appetite which further weakened her.

With her mother's health decline, the weight of caregiving also got heavier. Amidst changing diapers and spoon-feeding a liquid diet, Lilian also kept vigil by Mdm Wong's bedside 24/7, making sure that she was never alone. The EPICC team supported Lilian in caregiving - they took turns to visit Mdm Wong daily to play music, sing songs, do simple range-of-movement exercises with her and keep her company. Mdm Wong passed away at home two weeks later.



Reflecting on her caregiving journey, Lilian acknowledged that it had been arduous one but she would gladly do it all again if it meant that she could have her mother with her. As she slowly journeys through her grief to acceptance of her loss, so did her thought process shift; she started to find both relief and release in her grief, as she also believed that her mother has been released from her suffering.

'And in the end, it is not the years in your life that you count – it is the life in your years.'

- Abraham Lincoln.

While Lilian had tried to keep Mdm Wong around for as long as she could, she agreed that on hindsight it was evident that they both added life to each other's lives – and the EPICC team at ComSA Whampoa Centre has been privileged to be part of Lilian's caregiving journey.



** Names in article have been changed*

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