

Headline: **Building Senior-Friendly Facilities**
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Building senior-friendly facilities

ALL across Asia, the above-65 population is expected to grow dramatically over the next 50 years.

In Malaysia, most of the elderly live in extended, multi-generational households and rely on their adult children and other family members for material needs and personal care.

According to the World Bank, during the 1980s, more than three-quarters of the elderly in Asia were living with their children or family. During the 1990s, about two-thirds were living with their adult children.

But this family support system for the elderly is under pressure. The elderly have fewer adult children to look after them. More women are also working today as living costs go up. They are traditionally the caretakers of the elderly at home but now have less time and energy for such tasks.

There are also the elderly who are not keen to live with their children, especially when they are retired but still active and capable of looking after themselves.

As Malaysia's population ages, the scope for retirement living has to expand beyond home care by families, nursing homes and old folks homes.

There is a real need for retirement living developments that cater to seniors who want to live on their own but with facilities to cater to their needs.

In countries such as Singapore, Australia, Japan and the United States, there are legislations to ensure the well-being of the elderly, encourage ageing with independence and regulate unregistered nursing homes.

"As developers, we're waiting for the Aged Healthcare Act which is needed to regulate this industry," said Goldis Berhad chief investment officer Colin Ng who participated in the recent Retirement Living and Senior Care conference in Kuala Lumpur. Goldis is the holding

company of IGB Corporation Berhad and Tan & Tan Development Berhad. They are embarking on a development project that will cater to active seniors.

The Aged Healthcare Act will regulate private institutions and community care providers for those aged above 60.

In developed countries, Ng said, there is a spectrum of financial models such as lifetime leases, rental models, deferred

management fee models for elderly people.

Building approvals are also different, he said. They allow developers to build and operate retirement villages effectively. In some countries, the stamp duty for purchasing a seniors living unit is 50% lesser than for a conventional apartment.

Goldis aims to develop a project in Damansara Heights, Kuala Lumpur, that will be the showcase development for future seniors living

projects in Malaysia, Ng said.

"For our maiden project in this area, our focus will be on active retirement living, which will be supported by assisted living facilities. We may work with other suitable operators in the low care and high care (nursing home) to complete the service offering, but that will not be our focus for the

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Social needs matter too

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Damansara Heights project.

"We've been studying this type of development for the past three years. We hope that City Hall and other government bodies will be supportive of this concept. As our population ages, the current legislation doesn't really provide for alternative solutions for implementing senior living," said Ng in an email interview.

There are also the elderly who are empty-nesters. They live alone because their children have set up homes of their own or are abroad. Some still continue living in homes that have become too inconvenient to upkeep or are not conducive to older people as bedrooms are on the second floor and the flooring is slippery.

Some senior citizens opt for apartment living, but Ng said that might still not be the best solution.

"If this sector is not adequately addressed by the Government, we foresee that in the next decade we will hear of more and more stories of abandoned older people who are not cared for in an appropriate manner.

It goes against all our Asian culture and sensitivities of filial piety and respect for our seniors. It is our duty to provide for our parents in a dignified manner as they have provided for us," Ng said.

Even when older folks live with their family, their social needs must be catered to.

Older people have a fear of isolation, Ng said, adding that this was learnt during a focus group discussion that Goldis convened, and further reinforced by the experts at the conference. "When the children are at work, the elderly parents are left at home with nothing much to do.

A community-based and lifestyle-oriented development designed with activities and facilities for the active seniors is sorely needed in Malaysia," he said.

Ng said there were "a lot more questions than answers" at the conference, and it was glaringly obvious how far behind Malaysia is in the aged care sector.

"There have been a number of projects attempting to fill this niche market, but these projects have by and large failed or did not satisfy the needs of the seniors community," he said.

Beyond living spaces

Meeting the needs of those in their golden years has to go beyond providing aged care. The wellness of the elderly should be emphasised, stressed those at the conference.

"We should educate seniors to age healthily so that they can look after themselves and not be a financial burden," said Global Coalition of Ageing advisor Prof Nathan Vytialingam.

Daycare centres for the elderly, he said, would work better if people aged healthily.

Then, families can be involved in caring for their elders too.

For seniors dependent on aged care, there is a need for well-run and regulated nursing homes which offer comprehensive senior care covering holistic, physical, mental and social aspects. Retirement living, he felt, should more appropriately be termed as a "retirement lifestyle".

In Asia, this is a booming trend, especially in Bangalore, India.

Prof Vytialingam said, "One cannot simply 'import' successful models of retirement lifestyle in other countries and expect them to work locally.

"We need to tailor-make them (the models) accordingly and invest in people who are experts in senior care industry." Prospective entrepreneurs are warned against setting up more institutions for the elderly. Rather, they should provide "a living environment that gives the elderly a sense of well-being", added Prof Vytialingam. — Majorie Chiew