

Starving stroke patient can swallow again after neck massage from charity's therapist

Rehabaid Society to provide free sessions for more than 200 stroke sufferers

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Even when fed the most watered-down porridge, Ng Wing-zheung, 84, would still choke.

The two-time stroke sufferer, whose strained neck muscles made the act of swallowing impossible, was stuck starving at home until an occupational therapist from the Rehabaid Society paid him a visit and massaged his neck.

Rehabaid, a beneficiary of Operation Santa Claus in 2016, now looks to visit former stroke patients and conduct free rehabilitation sessions for them and their families so as to avoid tragic situations such as Ng's.

With a donation of HK\$999,000 provided by Operation Santa Claus, the 37-year-old charity will visit more than 200 stroke sufferers and provide them each with five free sessions, which are normally priced at HK\$1,200.

During each home visit, therapists and architects will educate caregivers on how to care for the patients and make their homes more accessible to those with residual disabilities.

Ng's daughter and main caregiver Ng Kwai-lin said the family did not know what to do prior to the visit by Rehabaid.

She broke down in tears as she recounted the experience: "I had never felt more helpless before. I had to see my father suffer every day."

Ng said her father was not referred to any rehabilitation facilities after he was discharged from hospital.

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Ng Wing-zheun's daughter, Ng Kwai-lin

A few years later, her father suffered from another stroke, which permanently robbed him of his ability to speak. But he was again quickly discharged without any rehabilitation suggestions.

Ng's case ultimately worsened to the point where he was mostly paralysed, and the majority of his muscles were stiff and tight round the clock, stopping him from engaging in the most basic activities such as eating and urinating.

Rehabaid eventually took over the case. Occupational therapist Lo Kai-fong conducted a home visit and taught Ng's family how to massage his neck so as to facilitate his eating.

Lo also identified various problems in terms of home design and provided solutions to make the residence more accessible for Ng, who is wheelchair bound.

Rehabaid chief executive Cecilia Lam Shiu-ling said its stroke rehabilitation programme, which provides free home visits to patients, focuses on filling the service gap between hospital treatment and rehabilitation.

"Hospital care is costly, so soon after they think you are good to go, they let you go," she said.

Lam said stroke patients' struggles really begin when they return home as "they have to cope with their residual disability".

"[Also], with the health care system in Hong Kong, we tend to give [rehabilitation] priority to people who have more potential to recover," she said. "So with the older patients, they could be prematurely discharged because hospital beds are expensive."

Lam added that more resources should be put into community rehabilitation services as opposed to short-term hospital treatment.

"The community rehab service in Hong Kong can be quite fragmented. When the Hospital Authority discharges a client, they have no control over which NGO will pick up the case," she said, adding that this was the reason Rehabaid decided to provide free home visits to stroke sufferers.

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