Occupational therapists in demand in greyer S’pore

Good prospects, competitive pay drawing more to the profession

By KASH CHEONG and LINETTE LAI

A TYPICAL day for Ms Natalie Chew, 39, might see her helping someone with a broken arm to feed himself or teaching a stroke patient how to put on his shirt with one hand.

The occupational therapist also visits patients’ homes to recommend how to place furniture safely or install grab bars to prevent falls.

“We help patients cope with daily life as they recover from illness or accidents. We help them regain independence,” said Ms Chew, senior principal occupational therapist at the Singapore General Hospital.

In greying Singapore, such professionals are much needed, and demand is set to increase.

But thanks to greater awareness, extensive recruitment efforts and competitive pay, occupational therapy in the public sector is not facing a serious manpower crunch here, unlike many other jobs. Current annual starting salary, including bonuses and allowances, is about $40,000, 10 per cent higher than in 2012.

The work has also become more exciting, with opportunities for specialisation and research growing in areas such as low vision and mental health, and the chance of overseas training.

Last year, there were 423 full- and part-time occupational therapists in the public sector registered with the Allied Health Professions Council, a national body.

In 2013, the sector hired an equivalent of 327 full-time occupational therapists, according to the latest figures available from the Health Ministry. This is a jump of two-thirds compared with five years earlier.

Having more such professionals translates to more time and care for each patient, said Ms Chew, who has 16 years of experience. She said she sees eight to 12 people a day now, down from 15 about five years ago.

She and her SGH colleagues could even start cooking groups for patients to help them become confident in the kitchen again.

At the National University Hospital, the occupational therapy team can now do home visits up to 10 times a week, compared with just two or three visits every few months five years ago, said senior principal occupational therapist, Ms Tan Lay Lay, in her 40s.

The head of Tan Tock Seng Hospital’s occupational therapy department, Ms Florence Cheong, 39, said since 2009, its therapists have even fanned out into the community, where they assess

Harder to fill other allied health posts

HEALTH institutions are also ramping up numbers for other allied health professionals, such as physiotherapists, radiographers and optometrists.

There are some 4,000 allied health professionals in the public sector, with the figure rising 10 per cent annually for the last five years, the Health Ministry said. Four in five vacancies are filled by locals.

While there has been an encouraging increase in occupational therapists, some institutions find other jobs harder to fill due to lower awareness. This includes prosthetists, who measure and create prostheses to replace missing body parts; audiologists, who help diagnose and manage hearing problems; and optometrists, who help diagnose and treat eye diseases.

KASH CHEONG

Home safety of the elderly who are not in their care.

The job is set to get more popular, with a local four-year degree programme to be launched next year. Those in the profession are also hoping for a local master’s course to cater to people who are balancing family and career.

While it may not be a cushy job, veterans say that helping patients is the best reward.

Said Ms Chew: “When a patient regains some independence and says ‘thank you’, you know you have made a difference.”

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