

Silra Home Revisited

Even with the best of intentions, moving an elderly group of former leprosy patients to a modern facility creates new problems while solving old ones.

On 10 September 2006, I paid a return visit to Singapore Leprosy Relief Association (Silra) Home, exactly one year after it was relocated to new premises in Buangkok Green Medical Park.* Walking through the multi-storied building, I saw many familiar faces, and we nodded and smiled at each other in acknowledgement.

Explaining the reasons behind the move, the authorities said at the time that the old home was run down and the site was needed for a new school. Consequently, the relocation to a brand-new building with modern toilets and elevators in an accessible area was billed as progress. But for the aging residents, whose interests were yet again sacrificed in the name of moving forward, it represented one more act of dislocation in their lives.

In the past, many had lived in Trafalgar Home — formerly the Singapore Leper Asylum — where they had jobs as cooks and cleaners, nursing aides and clerks. When Trafalgar closed in 1993, they were moved to Silra Home, minus their jobs in most cases. Then, last year, came the move to the new Silra Home in Buangkok Green.

The shift to Buangkok Green is probably the final journey for the 60-odd residents, who are in their 60s to 90s, and about half of whom are wheelchair-bound.

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Some welcomed the move. A TV program from 2005 shows them applauding the new premises for being cleaner and free of mosquitoes. The dilapidated buildings at the old Silra Home (constructed in 1971) were a fire hazard. One resident remarked happily that they no longer risked being struck by falling ceiling beams that had been eaten through by termites.

But for others, despite the better, modern living conditions, relocation has brought a fresh set of problems. In building the new facilities, the planners overlooked the basic needs of leprosy-affected persons. There is only one cubicle per toilet with wheelchair access and only three toilets in all for more than 20 male residents on the second level. The cubicle door handles, which conform to building standards, are too short to be gripped by those with hand



The author (left) with Mr. Chan Mun Tuck at Silra Home on 10 September 2006

disabilities. Residents must negotiate a ramp to access the wheelchair toilet. Wheeling up the ramp, residents have slipped and fallen on their heads.

In the old Silra Home, they lived three or four to a room. Now they sleep on hospital beds, more than 20 to a ward. They have had to exchange their own clothes for hospital uniforms, even though, as some protested, they are not ill. Meanwhile, they have been joined by other, non-leprosy affected persons, admitted with skin diseases.

The sleeping arrangements apply to married couples, too: Mr. Chan Mun Tuck and his wife are allocated two beds in one corner of the ward — the nearest thing they have to privacy. Mr. Chan and his wife have repeatedly asked for a partition but so far have received nothing but assurances.

Many residents feel disillusioned and apprehensive and long for the old Silra Home. Mr. Song Kok Huar recognizes the cleanliness and lack of mosquitoes. But he reminds me that the old premises had trees, grass and better ventilation, and says the new home “can’t beat that place.” Another couple, Mr. Kuang Wee Kee and Mdm Ow Ah Mui, decided against moving to the new premises and rented a one-room flat nearby. They disliked the communal living quarters and view the new home as “a camp.”

Those who suffer most are individuals with serious disabilities, such as Mr. Joseph Tan, who is 84, blind, wheelchair-bound, and has hand

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* ‘The Ambivalence of Relocation: The Experiences of Individuals Affected by Leprosy in Singapore’. The STAR, Carville. 64 (2), July-December 2005: 9-14.