



Comforting bedside support



WHEN a child is ill and needs hospitalisation, it's not just the mother who is in for the long haul. Spouse, siblings, relatives, even friends are involved.

Nearly 20 years ago, when my son Omar was admitted to the hospital, I would be there with him. It was quite easy when he was a baby, and up to the age of 12. There was always a bed for the mother in the paediatric ward.

Unfortunately, older patients didn't get the same privileges. The companion had to make do with a couple of chairs, or one soft chair at best. It didn't matter if the patient was a mentally challenged adult.

That was how it was when Omar was admitted for surgery to lengthen his Achilles heels two years ago. We were not allowed to bring our own collapsible cot.

From the time Omar was born to the day he underwent his first operation at just two years, we were in and out of the hospital for

a variety of reasons. The stay could be as short as three days, or as long as two weeks. We were fortunate that we lived in Kuala Lumpur, where the hospital and specialists were.

During that time, we met others from out of town. While one parent, usually the mother, had the companion's cot, the father or siblings had to find accommodation elsewhere, which could amount to more than the hospital charges, not to mention the inconvenience. It was hard enough that the child was sick.

These were days before mobile phones were available, when communications were not as easy as they are today. Even faxes were a luxury few offices had.

I recall when Omar had to undergo a brain surgery in the United States just before his second birthday. We were quite daunted by the living arrangements. We knew we had to be prepared to stay there for about two to three months.

The hospital did not provide bedside cots for a parent in the room, only a chair. There were family

rooms where parents more or less camped out or used as a base, but they would have to leave the hospital at night. So, families still had to look for accommodation.

We were fortunate that the university hospital we went to in Los Angeles had a support group for families who needed assistance in housing, keeping medical appointments, on the day of the surgery and recuperation.

After a few phone calls and faxes in KL before departure, we got a two-bedroom apartment for short-term rental. Later, we rented more apartments for my parents and in-laws who wanted to be with us, but most of all, with Omar.

It was a life-and-death situation — Omar's fate could have swung the other way. We were blessed that his surgery was successful.

The one thing many families like ours did before, during and after surgery was to share our experiences with others in similar situations. I never really understood the magnitude of sharing then. But as the years went by, more

concerned citizens and corporations had pledged their resources to help such causes.

One of more prominent companies that have been "giving back" to the people is the McDonald's group.

The first Ronald McDonald House opened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US, in 1974, when former Philadelphia Eagles player Fred Hill and his wife stayed in hospital rooms while their daughter Kim was receiving treatment for leukaemia. It was meant to meet the needs of families whose children were receiving long-term treatment away from home.

The Hills, along with the Eagles' management and Dr Audrey Evans, created a "home away from home" for families being treated at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

In 1981, the first Ronald McDonald House outside the US opened, in Toronto, Canada.

The first Ronald McDonald House in Malaysia was



Malaysia's first Ronald McDonald house in Bandar Tun Razak, Cheras



completed in 1999, the second in Asia and the first in the Asean region. Built on the premises of the Pusat Perubatan Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (PPUKM), it cost RM2 million.

Officially opened by Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, wife of former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed, on June 21, the facility has 19 bedrooms with attached bathrooms and common areas such as a kitchen, dining area, TV lounge and laundry room.

This establishment is run by a house manager who

takes care of the day-to-day administration and is assisted by PPUKM health assistants.

At the lavishly decorated Ronald McDonald House, families can have an air-conditioned bedroom for three people with an attached bathroom, prepare own meals, relax in the TV lounge, make use of the computer facilities, and most importantly, bond with and encourage other families who are in a similar situation. They only need to pay RM5 a night for accommodation during the duration of their children's

medical treatment.

There are now 147 Ronald McDonald Family Rooms in 16 countries. These rooms are a place to rest and regroup right at the hospital, close to their sick child. They have been a daily comfort to over 3,000 families who live in the local community and don't need to stay at a Ronald McDonald House.

"We know that families are stronger when they are together, and their presence helps a sick child heal faster and cope better," they write in their website.

"While Ronald McDonald

House Charities cannot make medicine taste better or take away painful treatments, we can help lessen the burden and ensure more than four million families a year have the stability and resources they need to keep their child healthy and happy."

The writer is a volunteer at Special Children Society of Ampang. After more than two decades of grappling with the system, she finds that the whole experience is just one big learning curve. You can reach her at juneitajohari@yahoo.com.



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah at the Ronald McDonald House