

# The ageing time bomb

**Jeffie Lam and Ernest Kao** look at how the city's demographics have changed over the past 20 years and the dangers that lurk going forward

**P**eople have been spending their whole lives trying to live longer, but to 93-year-old Sum Shuet longevity is nothing but a curse.

"I hope my son will fall asleep soon so I can also sleep," Sum says, referring to the Chinese metaphor which essentially means death. "I do not want to live any more."

The nightmare dates back 13 years when Sum's then 55-year-old son, an electronics repairman and the breadwinner of the family, had a stroke which left him staying in a care home.

Instead of being taken care of, the nonagenarian, who suffers from diabetes and hearing problems, has since resumed her role as her son's caretaker.

She has been visiting him every day, rain or shine, with the help of walking equipment.

"I once asked the doctor why other patients passed away soon after they were admitted to hospital but not my son," Sum says in a weak voice.

"I just want him to sleep soon so I can follow him ... Life is too painful for me."

Sum's sad case is not an isolated one.

It highlights the problems arising from the fast greying population – the growing trend of elderly people taking care of their older family members, as well as the lack of community-based services and an age-friendly environment that encourage active ageing.

Hong Kong's men and women also enjoy the longest life expectancy in the world – 87 years for women and 81 for men – implying that more people will be



Sum Shuet, 93, is hoping her son, who needs daily help after suffering a stroke, "will fall asleep soon so I can also sleep". Photo: David Wong

relying on social services paid by a shrinking workforce.

## THE AGEING TREND

In just two decades, the percentage of residents aged 65 or over rose from just 10.3 per cent of the population in 1997 to 16 per cent in 2016. This is expected to balloon to 24 per cent by 2025.

By 2041, it is projected that almost one in three will be aged 65 or above.

Meanwhile, the median age climbed from 34.7 the year the city's first chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, took office to 40 by the



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Ng Wai-tung, social worker



time his successor, Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, was re-elected in 2007.

When the first census after the handover was conducted in 2001, the proportion of elderly people in about half of the city's 18 districts was still below 10 per cent.

Fast forward to the 2016 by-census and more than a tenth of people in each district were elderly. The main areas were Wong Tai Sin, Kwun Tong, Southern and Eastern.

The severe shortage of subsidised nursing home places means the elderly have to wait an average of 26 months. In 2015, 5,881 people on the waiting list died, up 73 per cent from 2005.

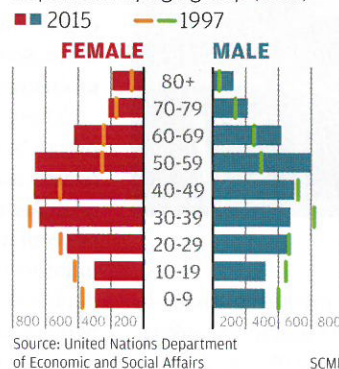
## "AGEING IN PLACE"

In 2014, the government tasked the Elderly Commission with formulating an Elderly Services Programme Plan aimed at achieving "ageing in place", or moving towards community-based support services as opposed to care homes. As a result, the elderly have been given vouchers to choose the types of services that best suit their needs.

However veteran social worker Ng Wai-tung says government efforts do not go far enough. "No senior citizen would like to give up their freedom and stay in residential care centres," he says.

## Getting greyer

Population by age group ('000)



"But the fact is they are not safe at home."

The residential respite service also requires advance booking for up to 14 days, meaning people are unable to seek immediate relief when they cannot take care of elderly family members.

Ng recalls the case of a 70-year-old woman who refused to go into hospital because she could not find her 80-year-old husband, a dementia sufferer, temporary accommodation at short notice.

## RISE OF DEMENTIA

An ageing city has also brought about a big increase in dementia rates, which are expected to worsen over the next decade. Dementia is already the eighth leading cause of death here.

Studies show that in 1995, two

years before the handover, just 4.5 per cent of those aged 70 or above had dementia. According to the Elderly Services Programme Plan, one in 10 of those over 65 now suffers from dementia, most commonly Alzheimer's disease.

"To reduce dementia rates, we need to develop effective therapies to help reverse degeneration [of the brain]. But a major obstacle is the lack of understanding of the pathophysiology of Alzheimer's," says Professor Nancy Ip Yuk-yu, an internationally renowned expert on neurodegenerative diseases at the University of Science and Technology.

In April last year, the university announced that Ip and her team had made a potential breakthrough in the fight against Alzheimer's by restoring the memory of mice with dementia by injecting them with a protein.

## SHRINKING LABOUR FORCE

The growing number of elderly people requiring assistance is however relying on a shrinking labour force, with the city on track to losing 14 per cent of its workers over the next 50 years.

Professor Paul Yip Siu-fai, a population expert at the University of Hong Kong, says apart from trying to lure quality migrants, the city must provide choices for older people in the job market.

"Hong Kong is not an age-friendly city but instead a place full of age discrimination," he says, citing its low elderly employment rate of less than 40 per cent compared to more than 50 per cent in Japan.

The city, he says, has already missed the golden opportunity to tackle the ageing issue during the demographic window – the time when there was a relatively high proportion of people of working age and the government had more resources available.

"If we do not work on it today, it will be almost impossible to do so in future," Yip warns.