



IN Asia, the idea of being left alone in a home when one reaches retirement or old age is a scary one. Most of the time, it is associated with abandonment by family, loneliness and in extreme cases destitution.

This perception is expected to change soon as families become smaller and more time and effort are exacted from family members to cope with the rising cost of living.

Younger people, having seen the amount of care their grandparents need at old age, are also concerned about their future with fewer siblings and even smaller families.

In the past three years, the trend has been strong enough to give several local companies confidence in developing retirement resorts to capture the potential spike in demand.

One of the most recent ones to join in the party is Eden-On-The-Park Sdn Bhd, which is named after its maiden development in Kuching, Sarawak – a pilot integrated retirement resort that comes with luxury apartments, villas and aged-care facilities expected to be fully completed by 2016.

The resort is going to be built by Sarawak Construction (1963) Sdn Bhd on a 3.24ha (eight-acre) site about 10 minutes from the Kuching International Airport, two-minute drive from the Sarawak General Hospital Specialist Centre and 10-minute walk from the Sarawak Club Gold Resort.

The aged-care component of the resort will be run by Optimum-Eden Healthcare Sdn Bhd, a joint venture between Australia's Melbourne-based Optimum Aged Care Systems and Eden-On-The-Park.

"We cater to the 'go-go', 'slow-go' and 'no-go' clients and a whole continuum of care," says Eden-On-The-Park managing director Victor Fong Yee Kow.

As pilot projects, retirement resorts and villages like Eden-On-The-Park are a taste of the future, where independent, mobile and able retirees aspire to live in a comfortable and manageable space with the company of their peers and access to healthcare services.

When they need assistance in their daily living or 24-hour care, they want to be assured that there are facilities for them to live the last leg of their lives with dignity and comfort.

Another player with a similar picture in mind is Gracious Homes Sdn Bhd which is building The Green Leaf Retirement Resort Community, a waterfront project along the Sepang Gold Coast in Selangor.

According to Green Leaf's website, the retirement resort is developed by a group of retired professionals and managers who share a common desire to retire in a lifestyle resort environment – yet remain empowered to age with grace and dignity within a supportive community.

The resort will be equipped with a 24-hour clinic with standby ambulances as well as a social recreation centre and specially-designed emergency access to apartment units.

Government push

Although there is tremendous potential in such retirement villages and resorts, most investors in the past have



by Lim Wey Wen



Artist's impression of Eden-On-The-Park integrated senior lifestyle and care residence resort

Retirement villages set to be healthcare's next gold rush

Anticipated demand for post-retirement living and aged-care facilities is attracting small private investments while larger players adopt a wait-and-see approach

been treading carefully through established concepts in Western societies that are more familiar to the Malaysian population such as better or upgraded aged-care facilities.

In Kulaijaya, Johor, Jeta Care Sdn Bhd has set up the first aged-care centre Jeta Care based on Australian concepts and Confucianist values.

Today, those interested in exploring opportunities in the retirement village and aged-care sector have the blessings of the Malaysian health ministry with the recent announcement of Eden-On-The-Park as an Economic Transformation Programme Entry Point Project (EPP) project under the Healthcare National Key Economic Area (NKEA).

Another EPP project is the Medicare Centre Nursing Home in Cheras, Selangor – the first phase of an Integrated Residential Care Centre by Singapore's Econ Healthcare Group which is expected to be completed in 2016.

The Medicare Centre Nursing Home will be later complemented with a retirement village with integrated healthcare facilities.

To regulate the sector, the health ministry has also drafted an Aged Healthcare Bill to be finalised by year-end.

The framework will provide a much-needed guide for larger developers and healthcare players, who are mostly adopting a wait-and-see approach to the aged-care and retirement village area.

Last year, developer IJM Land Bhd group managing director and CEO Da-

tuk Soam Heng Choon was reported as saying the group is ready to look at the retirement community concept and consider incorporating it into some of its townships.

Healthcare group KPJ Healthcare Bhd is also planning to convert about 60 beds at its Tawakkal Health Centre in Kuala Lumpur for senior living soon.

Winning hearts and minds

The immediate challenge for those who have already invested in the retirement village and aged-care industry is to change the perception of retirement villages from being a place that fills the gap of neglected responsibilities to one where people choose to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

"It will be an uphill battle to change [the] mindset," says Eden-On-The-Park's Fong.

"However we think the more well-travelled population, those who have lived overseas and those who have the need for aged-care, will set the trend," he says.

RHB Research analyst Noor Athila Mohd Razali thinks the perception will change over time with growing affluence in the country.

"Soon people may realise it is not a bad thing after all because it can benefit both parents and their children," she says.

With the wealth they have accumulated, parents could still maintain a comfortable lifestyle as they grow older and children could be confident that their parents are well taken care of even when they are away.

While the current demand for retirement and aged-care facilities is increasing, the concept is still new. Demand has certainly not outstripped supply, says an industry player.

It may take another 20 to 30 years for the concept to take hold as retirement facilities – whether they called resorts or villages – still conjure the picture of an old folk's home among those who currently belong to the senior-age group.

Public Investment Bank research analyst Siew Jin Ling acknowledges that the concept might appeal more to those aged 40 and below, who will move into retirement age by that time.

"It is good for companies to start now so that they have the first-mover advantage," she says.

Other foreseeable challenges include the staffing of assisted-living and aged-care facilities as well as the sustainability of such commercial facilities.

"The ability of retirees to continue to support themselves and pay for care over a long lifespan after retirement will be the greatest single challenge," says Fong.

The good news is initial response to retirement villages has been encouraging and there is likely to be more of these facilities available in the medium to long term.

But before then, a catalyst the industry is waiting for is the successful tabling and gazetting of the Aged Healthcare Bill, which will provide the rules and framework for industry players to work with. **FocusM**



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