

Minor Issues: Start early when it comes to care planning for your special needs kid

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The earlier one reads up about future care planning for one's kids with special needs and understands the options, the better. PHOTO: PIXABAY

SINGAPORE – I'll start with my conclusion: Don't procrastinate when it comes to future care planning for your loved ones with special needs. The earlier you read up about it and understand the options, the better.

And by that, I mean less last-minute running around to complete things because a deadline is looming. Can you tell I'm speaking from experience? An experience I'm still in the middle of, actually.

Now, for the beginning. When it struck me recently that my oldest child was going to turn 21 in less than four months, my first happy thought was, ooh, party time.

Although she is autistic and doesn't really have friends (she is unable to say, and all we can observe is that she shows no real interest in spending time with anyone in particular), she enjoys celebrations. And it seems mean to not have something for her 21st just because she has autism. Twenty-one is a milestone in many cultures. In Singapore, legally, one becomes an adult.

My second thought, right after that, was, hang on, there's something I'm forgetting. What was I supposed to have done, linked to her becoming an adult?

Later that day, as I was scrolling through messages in a parents' WhatsApp chat group, I realised with horror what had slipped my mind: I'm supposed to apply to be her deputy.

Deputies, decisions and dental care

A deputy is someone appointed by the court to make decisions on behalf of a person who lacks mental capacity, with mental capacity defined as the ability of a person to make a specific decision at a particular time.

As parents of a special needs child who is unable to make complex decisions, I know that my husband and I will continue being the ones to manage matters like where she will live, what activities she will do every day and how she will be supported financially.

But after she turns 21, we will need the proper authority to make some of these decisions, such as about her finances.

Several websites about deputyship oddly also specify dental care as being something that could be affected by the person being over 21.

I was slightly incredulous. Would a dentist really deny urgent care if my daughter was over 21 and unable to give consent? But apparently, yes. (Or, at the very least, complicated paperwork and declarations might be needed.)

Anecdotally, parents of adults have been asked by a dentist if they have deputyship. And the National Dental Centre Singapore states on its website: "Patients who are not able to give consent themselves and are over the age of 21 years old should have an appointed Deputy or Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA)... to make proxy medical decisions for them."

The website said that while not required for basic procedures such as scaling and fillings, "an LPA or deputy is required for invasive procedures such as extractions and dental surgery".

It added: "As paperwork to appoint a deputy or enact an LPA takes time, you should plan ahead. This will ensure that your loved one receives prompt access to medical and dental care when they need it."

Doing it on your own

So I started reading up. There is a lot of information about deputyship on websites including those from the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), Singapore Courts and SG Enable.

But although the explanations are mostly clear, it takes time to understand them – not that I do entirely – to the point where you can make choices about your own situation.

I had to decide: Am I eligible for simplified deputyship application or must I apply through the standard process? Should I do the application through the Assisted Deputyship Application Programme (ADAP) or on my own using the Singapore Courts' Integrated Family Application Management System (iFAMS)?

Do I need a lawyer's help? How much will that cost? Informal estimates seem to be a few thousand dollars.

Do I need a psychologist to do a mental capacity assessment for my daughter, or is a doctor's medical report to certify her lack of mental capacity enough? One organisation mentioned getting a report from a neurologist or psychiatrist.

SG Enable helpfully has a service directory of doctors who can provide the medical report for deputyship application, but it wasn't very clear if general practitioners not on this list can also provide the medical report.

The SG Enable website highlighted the MSF-appointed ADAP agency, Minds Future Care Planning, which can guide parents whose children are not in a special education (Sped) school or an MSF-funded day activity centre or sheltered workshop.

I did, in fact, reach out to Minds Future Care Planning by e-mail – I wrote in as a parent, not as a journalist – and received a prompt and helpful reply from a programme executive.

However, from what I gather, the assessments that Minds does are in batches.

I can understand why parents do it through ADAP, Minds or a lawyer, but I did not want to wait.

So I took my daughter to see our family doctor, who runs her own clinic, and she submitted the medical report on my daughter's mental capacity to the iFAMS website. I then, rather nervously, started the process of filing a simplified deputyship application on my own.

Many missteps

While iFAMS is not hard to use, as expected, you need to read properly at each step. The first thing I stupidly did was try to apply before the medical report was uploaded, figuring I could start the ball rolling. This, despite it being clearly stated on the website that a "doctor's report has to be submitted prior to application".

At the question “Is there an existing order for the Patient?”, I said aloud: “What on earth does that mean?”, then clicked on “Retrieve” anyway.

The result: a line in red that said “Failed to retrieve medical report”.

I did this twice (sorry, iFAMS) before realising I should wait for the medical report to be submitted – as instructed.

To cut a long story short, I completed my application, but only after several missteps and error messages. I must have saved my form as a draft at least 10 times due to being unable to proceed or because I had to do furious research to answer a question. I was logging in and out so often that I half-expected to be locked out of the system.

The good part about doing it myself is that the iFAMS fee is \$40.

The downside is that I’m only guessing I did it correctly. I have a case number, but I haven’t figured out yet how to check the status of my application.

Of course, things would have been simpler if I had paid attention to the letter my daughter’s Sped school sent to parents in the year she and her classmates graduated. Dated April 7, 2022, it was about deputyship. The letter has been on my daughter’s notice board until I finally remembered about it a few days ago.

While I am kicking myself for not applying for deputyship earlier, this experience has strengthened my resolve to continue with future care planning.

Next, I will review my daughter’s trust account with the Special Needs Trust Company Limited, something I have been putting off for too long for no good reason.

I will make my CPF nomination and look into Advance Care Planning, which relates to one’s future healthcare.

- Jill Lim is a mother of three and a book editor with Straits Times Press. She has written four children’s books, including *My Colouring Book Is Ruined!*, about a child with autism.