Cancer is an unseen killer that forgets race, colour, creed or age. Striking at any time, it leaves the victim in pain, agony and despair.

Housewife Aminah Shukor, 42, from Johor Baru was one such victim. A mother of four schoolgoing children, she was afflicted with a persistent bout of coughing which she had initially brushed off as a minor viral infection.

"When it became worse, my husband persuaded me to go for a check-up at the hospital early this year. There the doctor told me I had to undergo some tests," she recalled.

"At that time I was still ignorant and did not suspect anything amiss. Imagine my horror when I was informed that I had cancer. My world just fell apart. I thought I was going to die."

Advised to seek treatment as soon as possible (she was diagnosed with malignant thymoma – chest and lung cancer), Aminah was referred by her doctor to Institut Kanser Makna at Hospital Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (IKM-HUKM) in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur.

Here she had to take 23 different types of drugs to help her fight the disease.

Set up by Makna ( Majlis Kanser Nasional), a not-for-profit organisation, IKM-HUKM is the first cancer institute in Malaysia that provides accessible and affordable treatment to the public, especially to lower income earners and government servants.

READY TO SERVE ... the ambulance at the Cancerlink centre in Jalan Sisek, Kuantan, stands ready for emergencies.
It is a positive move to encourage us to play a more significant role in providing service to the public and complementing the Government.

- Datuk Mohd Farid Ariffin, president of Makna

Ensure a fair distribution across the board,” he said. “This should also be done in a quick and reasonable time frame of within a year.”

“It is also a positive move to encourage us to play a more significant role in providing service to the public and complementing the Government,” said Farid.

The allocation is certainly a much-awaited boost for NGOs, especially those like Cancerlink Foundation, which rely on public funds for their existence but don’t organise large-scale fund-raising activities.

“This is excellent stuff,” said Joanne Fernandez who is a consultant to the board of trustees of Cancerlink Foundation. “When I heard about the allocation, I thought ‘Wow, how much of that can we get?’

It certainly was good news for the weekend.

“When we need money, we usually go begging to friends and companies that are sympathetic to our cause. The last two years have been really stressful, what with companies having tight budgets due to the economic recession. We really had to scrimp and save to have enough money to run this year’s Sunshine Camp. (Since 1996, Cancerlink has been organising a holiday camp for children afflicted with cancer.)

“The money will come in handy, especially since we are planning to extend our services to smaller towns and villages and going in a big way into creating awareness of the signs and symptoms of cancer.”

At present, Cancerlink has set up centres which provide free accommodation and other services to cancer patients undergoing treatment in hospitals in Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, Kuantan, Penang and Ipoh. It is now planning to open centres in Malacca and Johor Baru.

Fernandez, however, was not really surprised at the announcement of the allocation as it had been expected since two years ago.

“We (health NGOs) have been having dialogues with the Health Ministry which has been very supportive of our functions,” she said. “We have talked about it for two years, and had expected an allocation last year. When it didn’t come, we said ‘Well, maybe next year.’”

She said the allocation also showed that the Government was sympathetic to the NGOs and treat-
ing their causes seriously. "If NGOs are given help with finances, we can then give better support to Government's efforts to help the public. And NGOs need to prepare proper working papers and plan well so that the Government can respond to their needs effectively."

Fernandez also suggested that an audit be done at the end of the year to monitor how efficiently the allocation has been used.

"This will also enable us to see what more needs to be done and how to address the problems," she said.

For the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), receiving an allocation in the Budget is not new. Two years ago, a subsidy of RM50 was provided to kidney patients using haemodialysis centres run by NGOs. According to Dr S.S. Gill, chairman of the NKF's board of managers, this amount is given to the foundation before being dispersed to other organisations that also provide this service.

"For us, this is not new. We have been getting the subsidy for the past two years. We will have to see whether or not there is an increase with this allocation," he said.

Dr Gill also noted that the RM24mil allocation was to be distributed to all healthcare NGOs in the country. Whether or not it is significant will thus have to be seen once the details have been worked out.

Nonetheless, Dr Gill urged the Government to provide more dialysis centres. He said in many other countries, dialysis was provided free to poor patients.

At present, there are approximately 9,000 kidney patients and the number is increasing. There are 117 dialysis centres, of which 55 belong to the government. NKF patients pay RM60 per treatment compared to paying between RM150 and RM250 at private dialysis centres.

Former Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) president Dr Lee Aik Hoe felt that the amount allocated was quite small, but it was nevertheless encouraging.

"Although RM24mil is quite inadequate to cover (the various health NGOs), it is a good start and it shows that the Government recognises the work of NGOs in community service," said Dr Lee.

He stressed that mental health problems are a major concern in society.

"As mentioned by WHO (World Health Organisation), every one in four persons who visit a general practitioner has a mental problem.

"In addition, five out of every 10 top causes of disabilities are mental health problems," he said.

The MMHA frequently organises talks, forums and workshops to promote awareness and understanding of mental health issues among the public. It also has a family support group which holds monthly meetings.

Most of the funds needed by the association to operate and run its activities come from public donations.

"We receive about RM12,000 from the Government a year, but that is less than 10% of total expenses," he said.