

Experts back raising minimum age of criminal responsibility

Social workers, lawyers welcome proposal as younger kids often can't fully understand their actions and consequences

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Social workers and lawyers have welcomed the proposal to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility from the age of seven to 10.

They say that younger children often do not have the intellectual capacity to fully understand or control their actions or to fully comprehend their consequences.

This is backed up by science, said Ms Lena Teo, deputy director of therapy and mental wellness at Care Singapore, which helps at-risk youth. She noted that a child's prefrontal cortex in the brain, which controls high-level cognitive func-

tions like decision-making and impulse control, is not fully formed until the late teenage years.

And throwing children into the criminal justice system at such a young age, often for petty crimes like shoplifting, may do them more harm than good.

Lawyer Amolat Singh said: "If you throw the book at them (put them through the criminal justice system), they may be scared stiff and this may result in more psychological harm to them."

Social workers noted that research has found that the younger the age at which a child enters the criminal justice system, the more likely he or she is to re-offend. One reason is that detaining children from a young age makes it harder

for them to re-integrate into society when they are released.

On Sunday, it was announced that the Penal Code review committee proposed to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility from the current age of seven to 10.

The panel also recommended that children aged above 10 and under 12 years, who do not have the

maturity or understanding to judge the nature and consequences of their conduct, should continue to not be held criminally liable.

In lieu of putting these young children through the criminal justice system, the committee is suggesting dealing with them through a system that involves counselling, treatment or other programmes under a non-criminal framework.

No further details of this new system are available yet, said the Ministry of Home Affairs spokesman.

The report produced by the review committee said: "Although there is no scientific consensus on when a child is mature enough to appreciate right and wrong, and the natural consequences of his actions, there is some authority that a 10-year-old is generally able to appreciate the importance of law and order concerns."

The committee also noted that the current minimum age of seven

is deemed too low by international standards.

For England and Hong Kong, the minimum age is 10. It is 14 years in Japan and South Korea. And the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Children says an internationally acceptable minimum age should be 12 years.

In proposing to raise the age limit, the committee highlighted that very few children under the age of 10 were caught for getting into trouble with the law.

There were about 150 children in the seven-to-nine age group arrested between 2014 and 2016. They comprised only about 2 to 4 per cent of the total number of juveniles aged from seven to 15 years arrested each year.

According to the police, the top offence committed by juveniles in the last five years was shoplifting. Other common offences include cheating, fighting, vandalism and trespassing.

Meanwhile, the proposed new system to deal with very young offenders, such as through counselling, has been lauded by observers. They said that the focus should be rehabilitation, not punishment.

Mr Alfred Tan, chief executive of the Singapore Children's Society, said it is key to ensure that proper intervention helps the child to develop the right life skills in the future.

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TTS's Associate Professor Pua Uei says the new procedure, done under X-ray guidance (right), is very safe. It addresses a particularly risky aspect of dialysis – the fact that a single vein in the neck becomes the only lifeline for some patients. The procedure has been carried out on three elderly patients so far.
ST PHOTOS: JEREMY KWAN



Improving dialysis patients' quality of life

Linette Lai

A local hospital is employing a ground-breaking technique that is making life easier – and safer – for many dialysis patients.

It addresses a particularly risky aspect of dialysis – the fact that a single vein in the neck becomes the only lifeline for some patients.

If this vein gets blocked, doctors must insert a groin catheter, which

is notoriously prone to infection and other problems.

Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTS) has been using a new method since July to overcome this problem. It allows dialysis to continue through an opening in the neck, even if the veins there are blocked.

Associate Professor Pua Uei, a senior consultant in TTS's diagnostic radiology department, told The Straits Times yesterday: "This is one of the safest and quickest ways

to salvage something that we had no good answers to before."

The new technique involves threading a fine, sharp wire up a different vein until it reaches the blocked area. The wire is then pushed through the person's body until it exits near the collarbone. A regular catheter is then attached so that dialysis can take place.

"Under X-ray guidance, this is actually very safe," Prof Pua noted.

TTS is the first hospital in Asia

to perform this surgery. It is done under local anaesthesia and takes around 30 to 45 minutes. The procedure has been carried out on three elderly patients so far.

A person is diagnosed with kidney failure here every five hours. Figures in 2016 show there were more than 6,600 dialysis patients in Singapore.

Although most patients who undergo blood dialysis do so through a vein in their arms, around 20 per

cent have to use long-term neck catheters.

TTS doctors insert over 400 such catheters a year. But around 40 per cent of people with them eventually develop blocked veins.

"When that happened, we used to have to move on to the next vein... and eventually we would run out of veins in the neck we could use," Prof Pua said.

He added that the new technique also helps to improve the quality of life for many patients: "Groin catheters are a lot worse for comfort, and it's harder for patients to maintain cleanliness as well."

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No haj pilgrims returning with flu-like symptoms

There have been no cases of pilgrims returning from the haj with flu-like symptoms in Singapore, amid two haj-related health scares at US airports last week, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Muis) said yesterday.

The two health incidents in the United States involved inbound flights that had people returning from pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, officials said last Friday.

A Muis spokesman told The Straits Times its haj unit has not received any reports of such symptoms from returning pilgrims so far. The haj quota for this year was increased to 900 people, a hundred more than last year's quota.

The last group of pilgrims left on Aug 16, and all pilgrims are expected to arrive back in Singapore by Saturday. About half of the pilgrims have already returned, said the Muis spokesman.

Asked about the health scares abroad, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said it maintains close contact with the World Health Organisation and its overseas counterparts to monitor the global infectious disease situation.

An MOH spokesman said the ministry also works closely with Muis during the haj period to advise haj and umrah pilgrims on the recommended vaccinations to get prior to travel, as well as precautions to adopt when overseas.

Among other precautions, travellers to any foreign country should be aware of any health advisories issued by the local health authorities in that country.

Toh Ting Wei

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