Witness stand not arena for humiliation in sex offence cases, judge reminds lawyers

He calls on legal fraternity to be aware of the impact the trial process can have on victims

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During the trial of a man accused of raping his mother, his lawyer suggested that the woman "could have easily avoided" the assault if she had just crossed her legs and "shut the gates".

In another case, a lawyer stared inappropriately at the breasts of a molestation victim and asked her to stand up in an attempt to show that there would be "motive" to molest her if she was wearing a low-cut top.

These examples were cited in a recent speech by High Court Judge Vincent Hoong as cross-examination questions that have no place in the Singapore courts.

Justice Hoong, who is also presiding judge of the State Courts, said: "We would do well to remember that the courtroom is not a battleground, and the witness stand is not an arena for humiliation.

"There is no honour in extracting testimony through degradation, nor is there skill in exploiting the emotional vulnerability of a witness."

He was speaking to members of the Singapore Academy of Law at a private event held at the State Courts on July 2. The keynote address has been published on the Singapore Courts website.

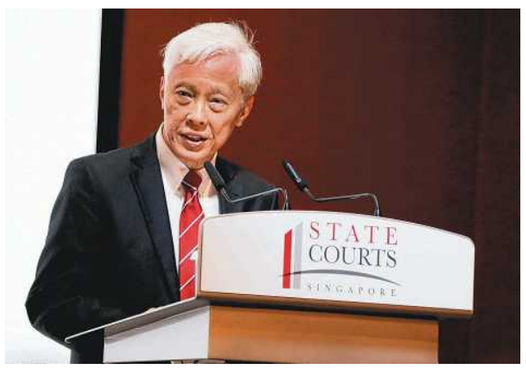
Justice Hoong's speech on navigating the sensitivities of cross-examining complainants in sexual offence cases is the latest reminder from the judiciary to the legal fraternity to be aware of the impact that the trial process can have on victims.

Most recently, in December 2024, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon emphasised the need for judges to take a more active supervisory role in the management of such cases, including the giving of evidence by complainants.

This was followed in January by the introduction of measures, such as the use of a checklist at the pre-trial stage, to identify contentious issues so that the judge can shut out irrelevant lines of questioning during the trial.

In his speech, Justice Hoong noted that judicial guidance in recent years has reinforced and clarified the legislative safeguards against improper questioning.

When conducted within proper bounds, robust cross-examination is essential to ensure that the defence can put forward its case fully and fairly, he said.



Justice Vincent Hoong, who is also presiding judge of the State Courts, said lawyers must be mindful to ensure that their questions are appropriate and relevant. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

However, cross-examination can be traumatising if conducted without appropriate sensitivity.

"It is therefore incumbent upon us, as judges and counsel, to approach this process with care, precision and a heightened awareness of its potential impact," he added.

Justice Hoong said questions that reinforce outdated notions, such as the expectation that a victim would put up physical resistance or immediately report the crime, can cross the line into being gratuitously harmful, irrelevant or demeaning.

"It is the judge's task to discern and draw that distinction with care and vigilance," he said.

However, lawyers must also be mindful to ensure that their questions are appropriate and relevant.

"Cross-examination is not an opportunity for theatricality nor for an advocate to demonstrate a flair for antagonistic or aggressive, repetitive and oppressive questioning," he said.

He listed past cases where lawyers' questions impugned the complainant's morality, relied on harmful stereotypes and victim-shaming tactics, tried to link the complainant's attire to the accused's "motive", or suggested that the assault could have been avoided if the complainant had not parted her legs.

Justice Hoong added: "It is entirely possible to challenge the reliability and credibility of a witness in a way which is measured, respectful and upholds the decorum of the court."

Lawyer Luo Ling Ling, who has defended clients accused of committing sexual offences, told The Straits Times: "I fight all the way for my clients, but I'm also in favour of protecting sexual assault victims. Both objectives can be achieved if you consciously cross-examine the witnesses with respect and restraint."

Ms Luo, who is the managing director of her eponymous firm, said she learnt this "the hard way" in a case where three girls had accused their stepfather of molesting them.

The lawyer said she did not cross the line, but one of the victims broke down when questioned about the contradictions between her police statement and her court testimony.

The victim was testifying via a camera, and those in the courtroom did not realise that she was crying until the counsellor who was with her informed the judge, Ms Luo recalled.

"(In) hindsight, I would have still done the same cross-examination and asked those hard questions, but I would have used a gentle tone," she mused.

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Recruitment of child participants begins for trial of new dengue vaccine

The study's lead investigator in Singapore, Assistant Professor Chia Po Ying (at left) with Dr Zhong Youjia, another investigator on the study. Researchers hope to enrol at least 700 healthy children between the ages of two and 17 in the study, including both those who have previously contracted dengue and those who have never had the disease. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

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A phase three clinical trial is being conducted here to evaluate the safety and efficacy of a new quadrivalent dengue vaccine in children aged two to 17.

Developed by US-based pharmaceutical firm MSD, V181 is a single-dose vaccine that aims to provide protection against all four serotypes, or strains, of the dengue virus.

Phase three clinical trials are typically the last stage of testing before a drug's details and clinical trial results are submitted to the regulatory authorities for approval.

The study's lead investigator in Singapore, Assistant Professor Chia Po Ying, noted that V181 is a live-attenuated vaccine, which uses weakened versions of all four dengue serotypes.

"Using the weakened forms of all these four dengue serotypes stimulates a human immune response to create protection against dengue infection in future," said Prof Chia, who also heads the National Centre for Infectious Diseases Research Office.

The new study here hopes to recruit at least 700 healthy children between the ages of two and 17, including both those who have previously contracted dengue and those who have never had the disease, said Dr Zhong Youjia, another investigator on the study.

This particular study focuses on children as they are more vulnerable to dengue and are also at a greater risk of severe infection, said the associate consultant at National University Hospital's (NUH) Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute.

Side effects from the vaccine have been mild and short-lived, said Prof Chia, noting that they include muscle aches and fatigue.

Children enrolled in the study will be randomly chosen to get a single shot of either the vaccine or a placebo.

"There have been no serious adverse events linked to vaccination with V181 to date, and the previous trials actually have shown a very good and favourable safety profile," Prof Chia said.

In Singapore, the study is being conducted at NUH and Tan Tock Seng Hospital, which have already started recruiting participants. Only a handful of children have been recruited so far for the study here, which began in June, said Dr Zhong.

A third recruitment site, KK Women's and Children's Hospital, is also in the works.

As at July 12, there have been 2,816 dengue cases recorded here in 2025, according to figures from the National Environment Agency (NEA).

In May, NEA noted that the number of dengue cases recorded here between January and May 2025 has dropped by about 74 per cent from the same period in 2024.

Worldwide, the study aims to enrol about 12,000 healthy children, also between the ages of two and 17, who will receive either a single dose of V181 or a placebo.

It aims to include more than 30 trial sites in dengue endemic areas in the Asia-Pacific, including Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Developing effective dengue vaccines has been difficult as the four serotypes are effectively four different viruses, said Prof Chia.

While getting infected by one serotype grants lifelong protection against that particular strain, it provides only short-term protection against the other three, she said.

This short-term protection eventually wanes, she noted, adding that those who contract dengue more than once risk antibody-dependent enhancement – a phenomenon where antibodies that are generated due to a vaccine or prior infection actually increase the severity of an infection.

Dr Zhong noted this can result in dengue shock syndrome, otherwise known as dengue haemorrhagic fever, a potentially life-threatening complication with symptoms including circulatory failure.

Designing a dengue vaccine has been challenging as it has to take into account this phenomenon, Prof Chia said.

Should the trials be successful and the vaccine meet regulatory requirements, V181 could be commercially available as early as within the next three to five years, said Dr Zhong.

Dr Paula Annunziato, senior vice-president for infectious diseases and vaccines global clinical development at MSD Research Laboratories, noted that half the world's population live in areas at risk for dengue.

"If successful, V181 could provide an important single-dose option for at-risk populations, regardless of previous exposure to dengue, to help reduce the significant burden around the globe," she said.

Dengvaxia, developed by Sanofi Pasteur, is currently the only dengue vaccine approved for use in Singapore.

However, it is available only for those between 12 and 45 years old who have previously been infected and poses an increased risk of causing severe dengue in those who have never been infected.

In May 2024, another quadrivalent vaccine, Qdenga, received prequalification from the World Health Organisation (WHO) – a process that aims to ensure the safety and efficacy of treatments – with WHO recommending the vaccine's use for children aged between six and 16 in dengue-prone areas.

Developed by Japanese pharmaceutical company Takeda, Qdenga was made available in Malaysia in June 2024.

Qdenga was submitted for approval here in 2022.

However, the following year, the Health Sciences Authority said Takeda had withdrawn its application.

The authority said then that the company could submit another application with further clinical data on the vaccine meeting the "required safety, efficacy and quality standards for use locally".

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