**Coronavirus** Singapore

# More healthcare workers facing abuse

From getting sexual advances from patients to being abused verbally, healthcare workers are facing increasing harassment. The Sunday Times looks at the reasons for the surge and how the issue is being addressed.

Nadine Chua

One patient grabbed a nurse's breast twice, while another asked a nurse if she provided sexual services.

These incidents happened at the National University Hospital (NUH) which said it is seeing more of its healthcare workers reporting that they have been abused since staff have been encouraged to speak up.

And it added that numbers do not tell the full story.

A Ministry of Health (MOH) spokesman said the number of abuse and harassment cases at public healthcare institutions has been increasing over the past three years.

In 2018, there were 1,080 cases reported and this rose to 1,200 cases in 2019. The number of cases spiked to 1,300 last year.

MOH did not provide figures for the first 10 months of this year.

It said it takes all cases of abuse and harassment against healthcare workers seriously and added: "We adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards abuse and harassment of our healthcare staff and will take action against persons who do so. Our healthcare workers deserve to work in a safe environment while they care for patients."

But reported figures may not reflect what is happening on the ground, said Associate Professor Peter George Manning, emeritus consultant at NUH's emergency medicine department.

Prof Manning, who is also the vice-chairman of NUH's medical board, said: "There are abuse cases that go unreported. Sometimes when nurses and doctors face an abusive patient, they'd rather brush it off and not make a fuss about it.

"But it's a serious issue and it's worrying because they suffer in silence, until they reach a tipping point."

He recalled how an elderly male patient had grabbed a nurse's breast on two occasions last year.

Said Prof Manning: "He was severely told off and he did not do it again.

"But there was another incident that also happened last year where a male patient asked a young nurse if she was interested in providing him with sexual services. She was flabbergasted."

The patient was subsequently given a stern talking to by a senior doctor and a senior nurse after the young nurse reported the incident.

Prof Manning added that verbal abuse cases at NUH has specifically seen an increase this year as compared with the past few years, but noted that there could be more abuse cases the hospital is unaware of.

He added: "That is why we have been focusing our efforts to get the message across to staff to defend themselves by reporting the incident. They know not to get into a fight with the patient, and they are aware of what they should not put up with."

An NUH spokesman added that patient-facing front-line staff like doctors, nurses, allied health personnel, housekeepers and security officers are more susceptible to physical and verbal abuse due to the greater exposure and interaction with patients and their family members.

Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases said they have seen an increase in abuse cases.

A TTSH spokesman said that in 2019, the facilities saw 218 cases and this fell to 158 cases in 2020.

But cases have spiked to 244 in the first 10 months of 2021.

Adjunct Associate Professor Habeebul Rahman, chairman of the well-being committee at TTSH, explained there was a dip in last year's figures due to fewer visitors at the hospital.

He said: "But the numbers have been increasing not just because people may be facing more stress, but also because more of our healthcare workers are seeing the importance in reporting an abuse case when it happens."

Ms Jennifer Wee, its chief communications officer, said there were close to 180 cases from January to October this year, up from about 70 cases for the whole of 2017. In 2020, the hospital saw about 170 cases.

At Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, there have been 35 cases recorded in 2021 so far. The hospital saw about 38 of such abuse cases each year from 2017 to 2020.

Meanwhile, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital said the number of reported healthcare worker abuse cases has almost doubled from 2016 to 2020. It did not provide figures for that period and for this year.

But things seem to be improving at Changi General Hospital (CGH).

Its chief operating officer, Ms Sandra Koh, said the hospital has seen nearly 100 cases of abusive behaviour against healthcare workers in the first nine months of 2021. There were 200 cases reported at CGH for the whole of 2020.

She said more than 80 per cent of the verbal abuse cases were committed by patients, while the rest were committed by the patients' family members.

One incident it saw this month involved a patient who got angry when he realised he could not go home after being hospitalised for a week.

He yelled expletives and derogatory racial slurs at the doctor and the nurses trying to help him.

The doctor tried to calm him down. But the patient took off his shirt and threw things at the healthcare workers around him.

The patient even threatened to sue the hospital.

To tackle such incidents, healthcare workers at TTSH have been taught escalation protocols should the need to report an abuse incident arise.

Ms Geeta Pattath Raghavan, assistant director of nursing at TTSH, said: "There are also panic buttons placed at each ward which healthcare workers can press should they feel unsafe or threatened.

"When it is pressed, staff from adjacent wards and security officers will be alerted and will assist where they can."

But this is not a response used to scare the patients, said Prof Habeebul. "This is really just to protect all parties and perhaps even prevent the patient from doing something that is irreversible," he added.

While such measures are important, Prof Habeebul said he hopes for mutual respect between all parties. "At the end of it all, we just want our patients to recover and get well," he added.

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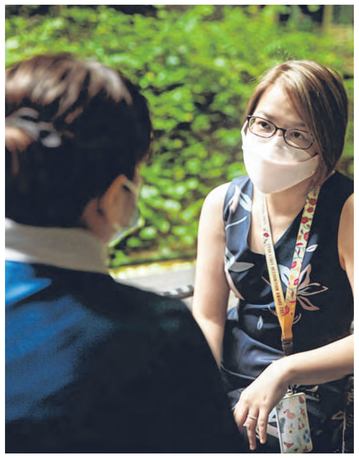

Above: A healthcare worker at Tan Tock Seng Hospital counselling a distressed nurse under the staff support staff programme.
Right: A reminder at the National University Hospital to members of the public to treat healthcare workers with respect.
PHOTOS: TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

NOT SUFFERING IN SILENCE

**But the numbers have been increasing not just because people may be facing more stress, but also because more of our healthcare workers are seeing the importance in reporting an abuse case when it happens.**

**ADJUNCT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HABEEBUL RAHMAN**, chairman of the well-being committee at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, on the spike in abuse cases to 244 in the first 10 months of 2021 at the hospital and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases. He explains that last year's dip in cases was due to fewer hospital visitors.

# Patient's son shouts at healthcare worker: 'I hope your parents die'

When a patient's son cursed her parents, Ms Ng, a patient relations officer at the National University Hospital (NUH), was shocked.

Recounting the incident that happened a few months ago, the front-line worker, who wanted to be known only as Ms Ng, told The Sunday Times that she was in a call with the patient's son and two other colleagues to resolve a compensation issue.

She did not provide details on the issue to protect the patient's identity.

Ms Ng said: "When things did not go the way he wanted them to, he shouted vulgarities at my colleagues and I. Then, he cursed my parents and said he hoped they would die.

"He also threatened me, saying, 'You better make sure I don't see you on the street outside'."

Ms Ng and her colleagues firmly told him that such comments were unwarranted and explained they could not continue with the conversation. The matter was later reported to their supervisors.

In another incident last month, a patient told her she was paid to get cursed at, and asked her to just suck it up.

She said: "Such incidents sometimes take a toll on me emotionally, and I do get affected.

"It can be very draining to experience this especially when we are trying to give our best to patients and their families."

An NUH spokesman told ST there have been over 70 physical and 120 verbal abuse cases reported at the hospital in the first 10 months of this year.

The spokesman added: "The number of reported cases to date has been fairly consistent over the past few years since a framework to manage staff abuse cases and encourage staff to report such cases was put in place in 2014."

Ms Ng left her job as a patient relations officer over five years ago due to a series of verbal abuse incidents.

The tipping point for her then was when a patient's daughter, whose mother had just died, said: "You better pray your mother does not die like my mother did."

After taking some time off, she returned to NUH in 2018.

Ms Ng said: "I am coping well now. Even though some patients and families are difficult, there are also many who are understanding and appreciative.

"This is part of where I get my job satisfaction from."

Nadine Chua

**CASES OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS HARASSED/ ABUSED IN SINGAPORE**

**TOTAL**
**2018:** 1,080
**2019:** 1,200
**2020:** 1,300

**CHANGI GENERAL HOSPITAL**
**2019:** About 100
**2020:** About 200
**Jan to Sept 2021:** Close to 100

**SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL**
**2017:** About 70
**2020:** About 170
**Jan to Oct 2021:** Close to 180

**NG TENG FONG GENERAL HOSPITAL**
**From 2017 to 2020:** About 38 cases per year
**Jan to Nov 2021:** 35

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL**
**Jan to Oct 2021:** 70 physical abuse cases, 120 verbal abuse cases

**TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL AND NATIONAL CENTRE FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASES**
**2019:** 218
**2020:** 158
**Jan to Oct 2021:** 244

SOURCES: MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND HOSPITALS

# Borderline abuse can be just as traumatic in the long run

"Were you even formally trained? Are you stupid or something?"

Words like these may not be vulgarities, but are just as hurtful to a healthcare worker when directed at them by a patient, said Ms Tong Yoke Tho, director of quality service management at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH).

Ms Tong was speaking to The Sunday Times about borderline abuse in TTSH and how such incidents can impact healthcare workers in the long run.

Dr Hoi Shu Yin, TTSH's chief nurse, said: "Borderline abuse may not be physical abuse or outright verbal abuse that includes racist remarks or expletives, but it tends to be an ongoing abuse that can cause healthcare workers to feel disrespected and distressed.

"Staff may not think that the incident warrants escalation, but we encourage staff to report it."

Exposure to such prolonged abuse can cause psychological trauma or lead the healthcare workers to feel emotionally drained, added Dr Hoi.

Ms Geeta Pattath Raghavan, assistant director of nursing at TTSH, noted that a number of foreign nurses make up the nursing workforce at TTSH, and that it is not uncommon for them to be subjected to racist remarks.

She said: "There have been occasions where patients tell these nurses, 'You are a foreigner. Go back to your own country.'

"Some have even questioned if the nurses were trained locally. Not only does this bring about emotional trauma, but they can sometimes get so demoralised that they cannot think about coming back to work."

She added that Covid-19-induced visitation limits at hospitals have also led to a handful of patients' families getting frustrated.

"I have had people tell a few of my nurse managers, 'Don't act like a god' when they were unable to get an extension of visitation hours. We try our best to accommodate when we can, but such rules are also for their safety," said Ms Geeta.

Healthcare workers at TTSH are trained to recognise an abusive situation and escalate it to their supervisors so that action is taken to keep patients and staff safe.

Ms Tong said: "There is also a staff support staff programme, where our healthcare workers are encouraged to look out for one another. And when an incident occurs, they know to step in and try to mediate the situation.

"They will also follow up and check on how their peers are doing, especially if they have been abused."

She reiterated that while such incidents do happen, most of the patients and their families have been very understanding.

Dr Hoi added: "The incidents we spoke about should not be generalised. Most of the people we care for have shown so much appreciation to us over the years. And we could not be more thankful for that.

"Regardless of what happens, our mission remains the same. We will always look after our patients and ensure they receive the best possible care."

Nadine Chua

**Incidents leading to abuse of healthcare workers**

1. Patients' refusal to comply with safety protocols
2. Staff not meeting patients' unreasonable demands (for instance, asking staff to buy carbonated drinks for them)
3. Patients seeking preferential treatment – wanting to be attended to immediately when staff are caring for other patients
4. Patients frustrated while waiting to access healthcare services
5. Patients' unexplained aggression without provocation
6. Medical reasons such as dementia, delirium or psychiatric conditions
7. Stress faced by patients due to family or financial matters

SOURCES: SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL, CHANGI GENERAL HOSPITAL, KHOO TECK PUAT HOSPITAL, TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

# Nurse who retired after serving 50 years rejoins profession at 72

Jessie Lim

When the Singapore Nursing Board sent out a call for retired nurses to rejoin the profession this February, Ms Han Joke Moi did not hesitate, as she knew that the Republic was scaling up its Covid-19 vaccination programme.

Ms Han, who left the profession in 2019 after more than 50 years of service, knew that administering vaccines was not a task many are qualified to do.

In an interview with The Sunday Times, the 72-year-old said: "There was a dear urgency to help because we want all our Singaporeans to be vaccinated.

"Not anyone can administer the vaccine. You have to correctly identify the deltoid muscles of the patient so the Covid-19 vaccine can be delivered intra-muscularly."

Ms Han has been with Thomson Medical for eight months, overseeing a team of about 20 nurses at its vaccination centre at Potong Pasir Community Club.

Her contributions have provided a booster shot to the Republic's healthcare system that has come under significant strain amid the pandemic.

On Nov 1, Senior Minister of State for Health Janil Puthucheary said in Parliament that around 1,500 healthcare workers resigned in the first half of this year, compared with 2,000 annually before the pandemic.

"These resignations were mostly tendered for personal reasons, for migration, or moving back to their home countries," he said.

Last year, for the first time in more than two decades, Singapore experienced a drop in the number of nurses working here.

At the end of last year, there were a total of 42,096 nurses, 572 fewer than in 2019.

To recruit an experienced nurse like Ms Han, some hospitals and clinics have started to offer a "finder's fee", which can range in the thousands, to staff who bring them in.

This is because it takes typically six months to train a new nurse and at least nine months for those specialising in intensive care unit work.

As part of her deployment with Thomson Medical, Ms Han keeps a watch over members of the public after they have received the vaccine.

She pays special attention to seniors, especially those who come to the vaccination centre alone.

Her job also involves teaching younger nurses how to reassure members of the public when they have doubts about the vaccine.

For instance, some of her staff were told by some people that they did not believe they were inoculated because they did not feel pain at the site of injection.

Ms Han said: "In order to resolve this, I teach the nurses, to first show them the amount of vaccine they draw out. We also show patients the empty syringe after (the injection) before discarding it."

Despite these encounters and logging 12-hour days at the centre sometimes as often as six times a week, she has no complaints.

"As a nurse, we have been on our feet all the time, so more or less we are used to it, " said Ms Han, who is single and lives with her two sisters.

On Wednesday, the Ministry of Health (MOH) will be closing four vaccination centres, including the one in Potong Pasir, given the good progress in the national vaccination programme.

With about 94 per cent of the eligible population having completed their full regimen of the Covid-19 vaccination, not all the staff at the centre will continue at the remaining two centres run by Thomson Medical in Senja-Cashew and Bishan.

But Ms Han will be among those who stay. She said: "I want to do my part while I'm still able to."

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Ms Han Joke Moi at the vaccination centre at Potong Pasir Community Club, where she oversees a team of about 20 nurses. Despite logging 12-hour days several times a week, she has no complaints. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

# New infections rise to 1,761; six die of complications

Timothy Goh

There were 1,761 new Covid-19 infections reported in Singapore yesterday, up from 1,090 on Friday.

The Covid-19 weekly infection growth rate was at 0.75, slightly up from 0.74 on Friday, said the Ministry of Health (MOH) in its daily update.

This is the 15th consecutive day the growth rate is below one.

The number refers to the ratio of community cases in the past week over the week before. A weekly infection growth rate that is consistently below one shows the number of new weekly Covid-19 cases is falling.

The intensive care unit (ICU) utilisation rate was at 56.6 per cent yesterday, up from 54.2 per cent on Friday.

Six people aged between 55 and 82 years died of complications linked to Covid-19, MOH said. All of them had various underlying medical conditions, the ministry added, without giving further details.

This takes the total number of fatalities in Singapore to 690.

The new infections comprised 1,689 cases in the community, 63 in migrant worker dormitories and nine imported cases.

Of the community cases, 282 are seniors aged 60 and above.

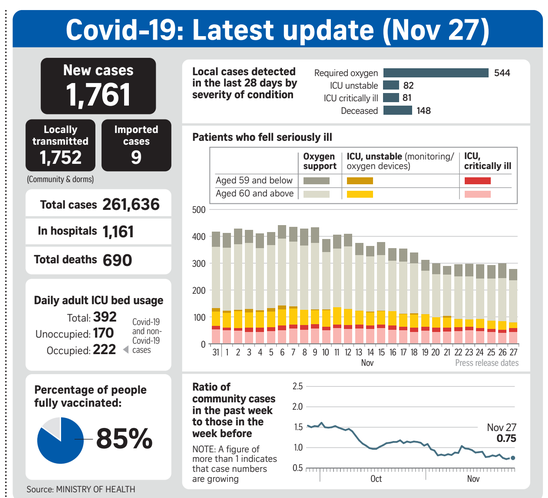
The total number of cases in Singapore now stands at 261,636.

Among the clusters that are under close monitoring is Jenaris Home @ Pelangi Village, which had 17 new cases, taking its total to 121.

Econ Healthcare Nursing Home in Chai Chee also reported one new case, taking its total to 38.

MOH said that over the last 28 days, 98.7 per cent of local cases were asymptomatic or had mild symptoms.

As at Friday, 85 per cent of the population had either completed their full vaccination regimen or received two doses of the vaccines, and 25 per cent had taken their booster shots.

"Seniors 60 years old and above, especially if unvaccinated, continue to be more adversely affected by Covid-19," said MOH.

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