

Front-line staff at Tan Tock Seng Hospital being taught techniques to protect themselves against abuse. Among other things, they are taught how to manoeuvre away from being grabbed by the hand or collar, and from being bitten or choked, as well as how to restrain an uncooperative patient safely. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Hospitals use videos, lessons to train staff on dealing with abuse

Front-line workers are taught techniques to protect themselves against violent people

Lee Li Ying

To break away from an aggressor who has you by the shirt collar, you would have to hold on to his wrist with both hands, and press your thumbs firmly against his palms while twisting the wrist inwards and pushing away.

“Find that acupressure point in the palm for this to be more effective,” said Ms Leong Jan Mui, a senior nurse educator at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), to her class of students.

These quick techniques to pro-

tect oneself against violent persons are not being taught in a martial arts class, but are sessions for front-line workers like nurses and patient service associates, as part of the hospital's efforts to protect them against abuse.

A tripartite workgroup surveying more than 3,000 healthcare workers and 1,500 members of the public found that more than two in three healthcare workers had witnessed or experienced abuse or harassment in the past year. Among them, half experienced abuse at least once a week.

Efforts are under way by the

Ministry of Health (MOH) to implement a standardised zero-tolerance policy against abuse in the public healthcare sector, with the healthcare clusters to develop details of the policy in the second half of 2023.

MOH has said the policy will include a common definition of abuse and harassment across healthcare institutions, an effective reporting and escalation protocol, and clear consequences that are enforced.

Hospitals like TTSH have in place their own measures to protect staff that include calling the police if necessary.

In 2017, in response to a rising trend of verbal and physical assaults on healthcare staff, the hospital developed the Workplace Sa-

fety on Aggression and Fearful Encounter programme or WorkSAFE.

A group of about 100 champions were trained in 2019 on techniques that are being passed on to 3,000 front-line staff on the ground.

The programme is made up of eight modules, including how to recognise workplace violence and de-escalate the situation.

Classes also include hands-on and practical tips on how to manoeuvre away from being grabbed by the hand or collar, and from being bitten or choked, as well as how to restrain an uncooperative patient safely.

The curriculum was developed by TTSH based on the most common scenarios faced by staff.

“We use the concept of micro-learning because nurses don't have the time for a one-hour course. So during roll call in between their shifts, we take 20 minutes to teach them these skills,” said Ms Leong, who helped develop the curriculum for WorkSAFE.

She said it took about four to eight months to roll out the modules to all the front-line staff.

Nurse manager Ranjeeta Kaur, 35, who has worked at TTSH for 15 years, recounted an incident eight years ago where a colleague was so badly bitten by a patient that she still has a scar on her arm.

“If we had this kind of training earlier, my colleague wouldn't have the extent of injuries that she had,” said Ms Kaur.

“Because she would know that she shouldn't just pull away from the bite. You're supposed to push the person's head towards you before removing your arm. The train-

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At Sengkang General Hospital (SKH), four videos depicting different situations of aggression and abuse, based on real incidents faced by front-line staff such as nurses, pharmacists and call centre agents, are aired during regular front-line staff orientation and in-house training.

Each scenario provides specific training on the protocol to be followed.

For example, in a situation where a patient turns verbally abusive because he is not able to get a refill of a medication he is no longer prescribed, pharmacists are advised to acknowledge the patient's frustrations, make three attempts to tell him his behaviour is unacceptable, and then activate hospital security if he continues to be aggressive.

A spokesman for SKH said staff found the videos helpful in guiding them on the workflow in managing abusive situations.

Ms Ng Sow Chun, chief nurse at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, said abuse can result from a mismatch of expectations from members of the public, who may expect more frequent updates from doctors than they are getting, to be served when they show up after office hours, or cared for by a specific staff member instead of the person they have.

“A strong message needs to be sent to deter further abuse. This is to protect our staff from abuse when things do not work out despite our best efforts to mitigate the situation,” said Ms Ng.

TTSH and Yishun Health Campus, which comprises Admiralty Medical Centre, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) and Yishun Community Hospital, said repeat offenders who abuse healthcare workers may be issued warning letters.

Ms Geeta Pattath, assistant director of nursing at TTSH and co-chair of the hospital's staff protection committee, said the hospital has issued warnings to four patients since 2018.

“It is used as a last resort, because we have no choice,” she said, noting that the four were really abusive and had harassed staff to the extent that they could not carry out their duties.

A patient who demanded to smoke in the ward and used expletives on staff was among those warned.

Both TTSH and Yishun Health said they have seen an increase in the reporting of abuse over the years.

Ms Eileen Cheah, assistant director of nursing administration at KTPH and a member of Yishun Health's safety committee, said it is an encouraging sign as healthcare workers have often chosen to suffer in silence in the past.

“Staff safety is one of our key priorities, and it is encouraging to see increased willingness to come forward to report incidents,” she said.

Adjunct Associate Professor Ha-beebul Rahman, chair of TTSH's staff well-being committee, said that in the past, only the most severe cases like those involving serious violations or injuries would be reported, but more and more, even verbal abuse is being reported.

“We are quite heartened by it because staff are not waiting until it escalates to significant harm before it's reported,” he said.

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Concern over people at risk of being homeless

FROM A1

change this through active outreach.

This was no easy feat.

When the network was formed in July 2019, fewer than half the 65 people it engaged were willing to accept help. But during the circuit breaker in May 2020, almost 300 sought shelter, including those hit by travel restrictions.

What is not captured in the street count data is the number of people at risk of being homeless in Singapore on account of eviction, family violence or financial issues, said Mr Derek Lim, head volunteer at Homeless Hearts of Singapore.

Rough sleepers from this segment might be underestimated in a single-night count, as they may have moved in with friends or into workplaces or hostels, he added.

For such people, social workers suggest there is hope as long as they are willing to get help.

AMKFSC said rough sleepers are open to staying in shelters when they are referred by agencies, which are often familiar with how the shelter works and attend to clients' concerns.

Housing Board initiatives such as

the Joint Singles Scheme Operator-Run pilot scheme, launched in December 2021, has also helped those in precarity secure rental housing managed by social service agencies.

The programme's three sites in Bedok, Buangkok and Bukit Batok can currently take in 400 people, and HDB is expanding the pilot in 2023 to three new sites for 600 tenants.

With more options for rough sleepers and more volunteers reaching out to them, there is optimism that more will leave the streets sooner rather than later.

The MSF report said 340 individuals from transitional shelters progressed to longer-term housing between April 2020 and March 2023.

Ms Ng said nearly 70 residents have left the S3Ps – run by Hope Initiative Alliance since 2020 – by getting a rental apartment, moving to transitional shelters, returning home overseas, or reuniting with their families.

“We are hopeful that we are improving lives, and will one day end homelessness together as a nation,” she added.

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A 2021 file photo showing a senior social worker at AMKFSC Community Services speaking to a resident at a shelter. The number of rough sleepers in Singapore has fallen by more than 40 per cent in the past three years, the Ministry of Social and Family Development said in a report on April 24. ST FILE PHOTO