

Managing spinal problems

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By TAN HUI LENG

NUH launches spinecentre, refers 80 percent of its cases there

HER 21-year-old son's spine is curved at about 43 degrees at the lumbar, so any exercise like jumping is a risk. But while doctors have recommended surgery, the family is holding off for now.

"We didn't want it even though there was minimum risk, as his organs are not affected. Also, at his age, his scoliosis has stopped progressing and would be affected only by gravity's pull," said Ms Sophie Tan, who added that they could reconsider the surgery option in future.

Her son's condition is not unique, with the number of adolescents suffering from a similar condition currently estimated at 2 to 3 per cent of the cohort.

The cause of the condition — formally known as adolescent idiopathic scoliosis — is unknown but the early onset of puberty has been suggested as a factor. While some 90 per cent of the patients' conditions are not serious enough to warrant surgery, the rest may need procedures to correct their postures.

Indeed, a National University Hospital (NUH) study has found that adolescent patients who had undergone corrective surgeries from 2003 to 2005 felt better about their self-image after their surgeries — although Ms Tan told Today that her son's condition did not bother him.

To better manage such patients — as well as the potentially higher number of spinal problems that come with Singapore's ageing population, NUH has launched the first-of-its-kind local spine centre at the institution.

Officially opened yesterday by the Health Ministry's Director of Medical Services, Professor K Satku, the University Spine Centre would focus on serious spinal complications.

"A lot of problems we see is due to the wear and tear as well as ageing of the spine," said Professor Wong Hee Kit, chairman of National University Health System's orthopaedics and hand and reconstructive microsurgery cluster.

:For example, there could be extra bone formation on the spine causing pain.

NUH sees some 60 to 100 spinal cases daily and up to 80 per cent of these are referred to the spine centre, which offers consultation, pain-relief services, X-ray, physiotherapy and pre-surgery assessment, as well as post-surgery counselling.

A study conducted between December 2005 and March this year found that 8.9 per cent of Singaporeans aged 40 and above are suffering from scoliosis, the three-dimensional deformity of a spine. The situation here is comparable to that in North America.

To attend to such cases, the centre will have five full-time spine surgeons.

"With their full-time spine practice, our spine specialists are able to gain experience and focus on improving the techniques and safety of spine surgery, as well as clinically relevant spine research," Prof Wong said.