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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."

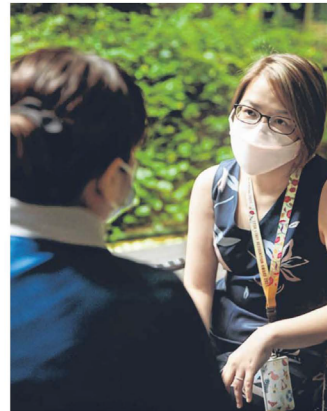
He recalled how an elderly male patient had grabbed a nurse's breast on two occasions last year.

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



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

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 Haseebul 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.

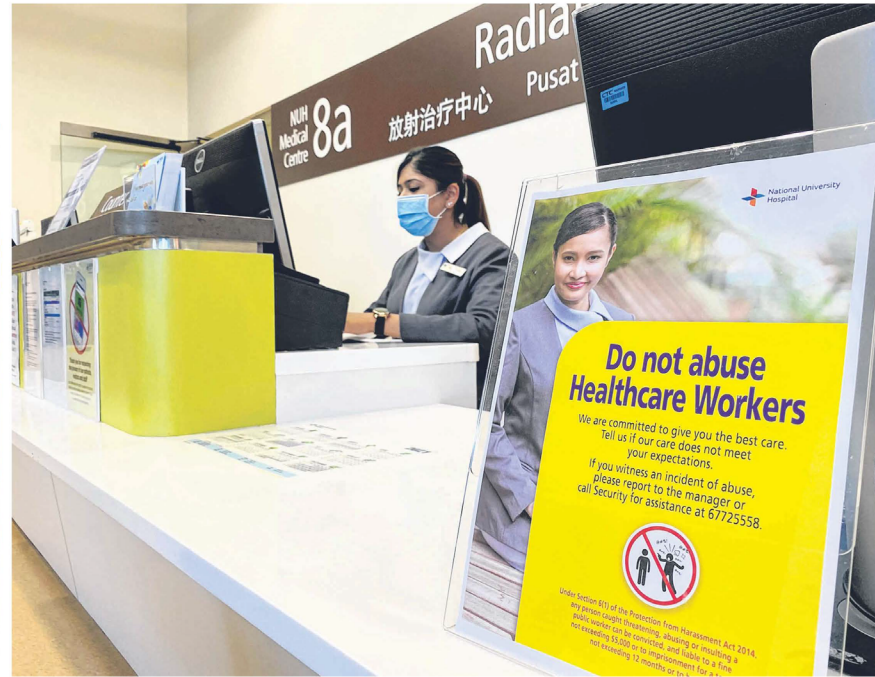
He said: "But the numbers have been increasing not just because people may be facing more stress, but also because more of our healthcare workers are seeing the importance in reporting an abuse case when it happens."

At Singapore General Hospital (SGH), the number of abuse cases has been increasing over the years.

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 Chang 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 Haseebul. "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 Haseebul 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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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