

A good measure of pain

SGH is Asia's first hospital to introduce the system

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PATIENTS at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) are being slapped with a pain ruler.

But far from being a painful experience, this pioneering pain management system will help the hospital treat its patients according to their degree of pain.

SGH is the first hospital in Asia to recognise and measure pain as a patient's "fifth vital sign" – after pulse rate, blood pressure, core temperature and the respiration rate.

Since April 1, it has introduced a systematic way of assessing and recording a patient's pain on their medical charts.

This is where the pain ruler comes in – a plastic strip with a "Pain-o-meter" printed on it.

Patients are asked to rate the severity of their pain on a scale of one to 10, from mild to severe, or, even by pointing at a series of expressive cartoon faces. The patient is then treated accordingly with analgesic medication, acupuncture or physiotherapy,

depending on the degree of distress.

Dr Yeo Sow Nam, a pain management specialist at SGH's department of anaesthesia, said: "We want to launch this project because we recognise pain as a very important part of a patient's care ... We want to avoid under-reporting and the problems of acute pain going on unnoticed, untreated and then leading to chronic pain."

Chronic pain – pain lasting more than three months – is seen as a disease which causes depression, sleep disturbance, thoughts of suicide and even job loss, added Dr Yeo. But he admitted that measuring pain can be a subjective exercise.

So, "if the patient tells us his pain is a seven, but is smiling, I'll tell him that pain level is similar to when a woman goes through labour without anaesthesia".

Other public hospitals and specialist centres are to introduce pain-monitoring systems soon.

SGH will hold a public pain management forum on April 24 from 1.30 to 4pm at Block 6, Level 9.