

Hospitals to now see pain as vital sign

By Sarah Ng

FROM now on, when a Singapore General Hospital doctor treats you, expect to be asked: "On the scale of zero to 10, how would you rate your pain?"

This is part of a plan that the hospital launched last Thursday to better assess and document pain experienced by both out-patients and those who are warded.

The hospital now recognises pain as the fifth vital sign, along with the established four – pulse, temperature, blood pressure and respiration rate – which are monitored regularly.

Dr Cynthia Goh, senior consultant and head of palliative medicine at the National Cancer Centre, said at a media briefing yesterday: "We have been managing acute pain for patients undergoing surgery for the past 20 years, but now we want to expand it to all patients. We want them to know that they don't have to suffer in silence."

Acute pain has the potential of escalating into a disabling chronic condition.

Explained Dr Yeo Sow Nam, pain management specialist and associate consultant at SGH's department of anaesthesia and surgical intensive care: "Chronic pain can develop into diseases, or problems such as anxiety, depression, suicidal risk and even loss of job."

Chronic pain is defined as pain that outlasts the usual period of healing, or more than three months.

Pain management includes the supervised use of painkillers such as paracetamol, codeine, morphine and nerve blocks.

This system is to be introduced to hospitals under the SingHealth group, including KK Women's and Children's Hospital and Changi General Hospital.