

Doc: 500,000 suffering from chronic pain

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AFTER standing for just five to 10 minutes, the pain in Mr Chia Jun Wei's lower back would be so severe, his left leg would go numb. Even sleeping was a problem, as he would "feel a force pushing into the lower back".

He lived with the problem, caused by damage to the small joints in his lower back, for years before he sought help.

Then he was referred to Dr Yeo Sow Nam, Singapore General Hospital's director of pain management, and his pain has virtually disappeared.

Dr Yeo said that there are many people like Mr Chia out there. His advice: "Don't suffer in silence. If your doctor can't help you, get a second opinion."

He estimates that about 500,000 people in Singapore are suffering from chronic pain such as severe lower back pain, migraine and pain caused by cancer. Thousands more suffer from acute pain following an operation or an accident. For some, the pain can be so bad that it affects their ability to work, or even to lead a normal life.

But this is slowly changing as doctors and hospitals here pay more attention to treating pain.

Since April 1 this year, pain has been monitored at the Singapore General Hospital and the National Cancer Centre as a fifth vital sign, in addition to pulse and breathing rates, blood pressure and temperature.

Other public hospitals and specialist centres are expected to start doing so in the next few months. There are also pain management clinics at Mount Elizabeth and Gleneagles hospitals. Although the Pain Association of Singapore has more than 100 members, including oncologists, palliative therapists, physiotherapists and neurologists, pain management has received more attention only in recent years.

To spread the message, SGH's pain

management services department is holding a talk on the importance of pain management for about 150 doctors this afternoon at a hotel in town.

Dr Yeo said 90 per cent of all pain can be treated by a good family physician. Another six per cent will need specialist care as the source of pain and the treatment for it may not be obvious.

Dr Chan Kay Fei, a senior consultant specialising in pain at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, said chronic pain is more difficult to define and treat than acute pain. Sometimes, it can persist even after the cause of the pain has been treated.

There are basically three types of pain — of the nerve, muscle and bone. This has to be properly diagnosed before treatment can be given.

Dr Yeo gave the example of shingles, which is caused by the chicken pox virus. Even after the rash has disappeared, the pain can remain. It can be so bad that some people cannot even be touched or put on a shirt.

Doctors may have to prescribe antidepressants or anti-convulsants to stop such pain. If nothing is done, the pain could become chronic and be very difficult to treat.

For people whose pain cannot be totally removed, reducing its severity could bring a major improvement in their quality of life. Dr Yeo gave the example of someone who is wheelchair-bound because of pain. If the pain can be relieved to the point where the person can walk with the help of a stick, "it's a huge leap for them", he said.

Treatment is not always drugs. Mr Chia was given radio frequency therapy, a treatment that can keep the pain at bay for about three years. He has also been taught how to strengthen his lower back so the pain will not recur even after the effect of the treatment wears off.

Dr Chan said it was important for people to take an active role in curing themselves of pain. Strengthening exercises could prevent pain from recurring,



LAU POOK KONG

Don't suffer in silence like Mr Chia Jun Wei (above) did for years before he went to a doctor for help to ease the pain in his lower back.