

Mummy, pain!

It may not be an excuse to skip school, but an indication of other problems

REETA RAMAN

reeta@newstoday.com.sg

NINE-year-old Don* (name has been changed) was a normal, healthy child. Then one day, and for two long months after that, he refused to walk because his legs hurt so much.

His lower limb muscles were so tight that when he did walk, it was with an abnormal gait. Tests done on him ruled out any neurological causes.

Upon further questioning, medical professionals at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital's (KKH) multi-disciplinary pain clinic found out that he was not performing well in school.

Don was a bright child. But he could not learn well in a classroom setting. He was not an auditory learner. He had to use his hands to learn things.

A psychologist from the pain clinic assessed Don's reading abilities and IQ levels.

Eventually, the clinic offered to refer him to a special school to cater to his needs.

Don is just one of the many children who are referred to the pain clinic, only to discover that the pain they suffer from, is in fact a symptom of an underlying condition.

In fact, some statistics indicate that as many as 80 to 90 per cent of children with non-cancer causing chronic pain, like Don, have psychosocial factors or stress that contribute to persistent pain symptoms, said Dr Michelle Tay, a consultant with the department of anaesthesia (paediatrics) at KKH.

results to the extent that they ignore their children's pain.

Locally, the study of pain in children is still in its infancy. With the exception of a National University Hospital survey in 2003 to determine the incidence of RAP in Singapore, there has been no other known local data published on this subject.

Until recent years, even some medical personnel and doctors were unaware of how serious chronic pain was in children because little was known and published about it, said Dr Tay.

CHRONIC PAIN OFTEN UNTREATED IN CHILDREN

Pain is generally classified as either acute or chronic pain. Acute pain is also related to injuries such as trauma or surgery, and often resolves after an appropriate healing period.

Chronic pain is often defined as pain that lasts for more than three months. It can either be cancer-related pain or non-cancer-related pain such as chronic headaches, and recurrent abdominal pains (RAP).

In Singapore, the more common forms of chronic pains experienced by children include headaches, RAP and non-specific musculoskeletal pain, said Dr Tay.

Yet, chronic pain often remains untreated, she said, because young children are less able to effectively express their pain well.

Other times, parents place too much importance to school attendance and exam

UNDERNEATH THE PAIN

For most of us, pains such as headaches subside over time. For children with chronic pain, it stays.

Often, there are no real pathologic reasons for chronic pain in children, said doctors.

So even after doctors investigate these children for their pains by conducting blood tests and other radiological methods, results indicate that all is normal.

Doctors say that very often, children suffer chronic pain because of psychosocial factors such as family dysfunction, peer relationship problems or problems in school.

This is why in many instances, it is a coping mechanism of sorts for children.

Said Dr Yeo Sow Nam, director of the The Pain Specialist at Mount Alvernia Hospital: "Most of the time, the cause of recurrent pains in children who are 12 years and below are stress-related.

Peer pressure, sibling rivalry and solicitous parents who are over-caring, yet who do not sufficiently communicate with their children, are some likely reasons."

Overseas figures reveal that recurrent headaches occur in as many as three to six per cent of toddlers, 20 per cent of preschoolers, 50 per cent of nine-year-olds and 70 per cent of adolescents.

NO QUICK FIX

Doctors use various visual analogue scales (scales with numbers from 0 to 10) or pain rulers (scales with various smiley and sad faces) so that children can point to these scales to indicate how much pain they are in.

With this knowledge, doctors can determine how much pain the child has and also to keep track of how well therapy and treatments have helped the child.

After diagnosis, treating the pain requires some work.

"The child will have to learn various coping and behaviour modification strategies, the family has to get involved and in some instances, medications will also have to be prescribed," said Dr Yeo.

So the next time, if the little ones keep coming back to you and saying "Mummy, very painful!", take a step back and reconsider before brushing them aside.