

# Pain • The Fifth Vital Sign

All patients go through the standard recording of their "Vitals" once admitted into hospitals in Singapore: pulse and breathing rates, blood pressure and temperature are noted. Since April 1 this year at Singapore General Hospital (SGH), another vital has been added on – pain.

Other public hospitals and specialist centres will start monitoring this fifth vital sign as well, within the next few months.

"Pain is a medical condition that is relatively under-treated, like a poor second cousin," said Dr Cynthia Goh, pain relief expert from the National Cancer Centre. "Doctors tend to view it as a secondary problem to a disease, while patients often accept it as inevitable and do not bring it up."

Akin to a pain-o-meter, patients will be asked to rate the amount of pain they feel on a scale of zero to 10. They will also be asked to describe their pain. Those unable to describe can choose from a range of printed facial expressions that corresponds to what they feel.

Mild pain will be managed by nurses, while the more serious cases will be seen by a pain specialist. Prior to this introduction of pain management efforts, it was mainly anaesthetists who trained as pain specialists.

SGH pain specialist Dr Yeo Sow Nam maintains that routine checks of pain levels would cut down inadequate treatment of pain. The pain check would also alert doctors to possible complications, such as a wound that has become infected.

Pain is now increasingly regarded as a disease as sufferers can become depressed, irritable, anxious and afraid. Pain which is not handled well could develop into chronic pain, (validated by studies in the US, Australia and Europe where there were one in five sufferers). Chronic pain, in turn, is more difficult to treat.

Thankfully, suffering in painful silence will be a thing of the past. What a relief to know that medical professionals will now regard the pain factor in a different and more concerned light. ☐

