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35 HIV cases detected

CGH is the first hospital to offer voluntary HIV tests to all its patients

By Salma Khalik

CHANGI General Hospital (CGH) picked up 35 HIV-positive patients in the first half of this year through its voluntary patient screening programme.

Most of them did not know they were carrying the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or Aids. Some might not have known so for many more years, said CGH chief executive T.K. Udairam.

These patients have been referred to the Communicable Diseases Centre for counselling and early treatment, which gives them a better chance of keeping the infection at bay. They can also take precautions against passing the potentially deadly virus to someone else, an offence that can land them in jail.

The 35 patients identified through voluntary screening in six months were almost twice the number identified through HIV tests their doctors ordered in previous years.

In the last three years, an average of 38 CGH patients each year found out their HIV status only because their doctors asked for the test to be done, on suspicion that their illnesses were caused by Aids.

The number of diagnosed Aids cases has been on the increase here - 442 cases were reported last year, more than double the 173 seen 10 years ago.

The rate per million population has also gone up, from 55 a decade ago to 118 last year.

But many experts fear that these figures are just the tip of the iceberg.

Of the 35 cases that surfaced at CGH between mid-December and the end of June, 31 were men. More than a third were aged between 40 and 49.

At CGH, the first hospital here to offer the HIV test to all inpatients as a matter of routine, about three in 10 inpatients, or about 6,500 people in the first half of this year, opted to take it.

The test costs between \$6 and \$25, depending on the ward class.

Mr Udairam said many of those who did not want the test were elderly or repeat patients who had been tested before. Tests were not offered to those under 21 years old, the age of consent.

Singapore General Hospital became the second to offer voluntary screening to all its inpatients two months ago. It is still too early to tell how effective it has been in identifying Aids patients early.

CGH had some teething problems in offering the voluntary test. Almost half the patients who wanted it were discharged without finding out their HIV status.

This was only discovered in May. A review of the system found a huge discrepancy between the number of patients who wanted the test and the number of laboratory tests done.

The hospital will soon send out letters to more than 2,000 discharged patients to tell them about the discrepancy and invite them back to get the test done.

Mr Udairam said the system has been tweaked, but some patients are still falling through the cracks, largely because the test is sometimes overlooked.

He expects to iron out all the problems by early next year. Already, checks are made daily by comparing the number of patients who agree to the test with the number of tests carried out.

Voluntary screening was started at CGH as a pilot programme, but is now a permanent feature. The Health Ministry may also want to get other hospitals to make this screening routine.

Besides its inpatients, CGH also offers its employees HIV tests. When this was launched last August, more than 80 per cent of them took up the offer.

Mr Udairam expects a similar response to this year's programme, which will start this month.

The risk of a health-care worker passing the disease to a patient is far lower than the risk of their getting infected by patients, but it is a risk best avoided, he said.

An employee found HIV-positive would be moved out of exposure-prone work such as surgery.

Mr Udairam stressed that they would not lose their jobs, and that their HIV status would be kept confidential.

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