

CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

More help for older kids

Mental health clinic for autistic youth the first of its kind here

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CARING for an autistic child can be like running a marathon, described one doctor, who joined the race three years ago by setting up Singapore's first, and only, public clinic dealing with older autistic children with mental health problems.

The Autism Clinic, established by Dr Sung Min, a consultant in child and adolescent psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health, reaches out to children between six and 19 years old. In other hospitals, their child development unit focuses on children below six.

Mental health problems can develop when autistic children hit primary school age or adolescence, said Dr Sung. "As they get older, they get more aware, there are more environmental demands and stresses."

Autism is a relatively rare disorder that affects one's ability to communicate and socialise. There is no cure, but intervention and therapies can help.

With these deficiencies, autistic children "do end up with a higher likelihood" of encountering stress

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Dr Sung Min, who established The Autism Clinic three years ago



WEE TECK HIAN

and hence, anxiety or depression, said Dr Sung, the recipient of the 2005 Healthcare Manpower Development Plan Fellowship Award.

Her clinic, which has seen 651 cases so far, has a busy schedule. This prevents the four to five-member team from spending more time on each child, said Dr Sung.

Therapists use visual aids and role-playing as part of the intervention strategies. Structure and schedules are also enforced, as it helps children learn better.

On average, each child undergoes a one-hour session every two weeks. It takes an average of eight sessions for progress to be seen. Through the sessions, Dr Sung sees parents struggle to help their child. "Some parents are supportive and try very hard, while others are rejecting," she said.

One single mother shared with TODAY her experience in raising her son who was diagnosed with autism at 18 months.

The beginning of this journey "was the most distressing time", said Ms Choo Kai Ying, 37. Learning about his condition helped her feel "less disempowered".

Her son, Sebastien, used to throw huge tantrums when he was frustrated, but he has since stopped. "When he was aggressive, I would take away his favourite toys or bed ... and return them on days he wasn't."

As autistic children grow older, they face difficult school work and people judging them — and they get "quite fed up" by the time they reach their teens, Ms Choo said.

Sebastien, however, is home-schooled. Ms Choo teaches him while working on writing and editing projects from home. Her latest book, *Raising Sebastien: Realising the Potential of Your Autistic Child*, details her experiences.

Sebastien, now 13, is at a "transitional period" where he faces new challenges, such as changing previous habits. He also still gets "unwanted attention" when he goes out.

But older autistic children also have "more experience with the world" and learn to cope, so they are less scared, noted Ms Choo.

A leg up for knee replacement surgery

IT WORKS for surgeons the way global positioning systems help to navigate drivers.

And with the aid of computers that provide a "road map" of the knee, Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) is now able to offer a new form of knee replacement surgery that results in implants which are more accurately aligned and last longer.

Dr Teo Yee Hong, consultant at its department of orthopedic surgery, has been trying to pioneer this surgery in TTSH since he returned from Melbourne last February on a Healthcare Manpower Development Fellowship Award. He spent nine months learning about the procedure.

Currently, 50 per cent of revision surgeries — where the implants have to be replaced after a few years — result from misalignment. An implant

should usually last 10 to 15 years.

The new procedure is particularly beneficial to younger, more active patients; those facing complex problems, such as their lower limbs having been fractured previously; or those who need revision surgery, said Dr Teo.

Retiree Dennis Ong, 63, had undergone two surgeries. The first, done last November, used the conventional method, while his second knee operation in April used the new procedure. Both surgeries were "done very well" but, "I think with the computer, it was easier for Dr Teo" said Mr Ong, who had bowed legs.

TTSH conducts about 600 knee replacement surgeries a year. Dr Teo has performed computer aided surgery on all his 70 cases to date.

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HEALTHCARE AWARDS GET 37% BOOST

The National Healthcare Group is giving out 37 per cent more Health Manpower Development Plan Fellowship Awards this year. A total of 189 NHG staff comprising doctors, nurses, health sciences professionals and healthcare administrators received the award yesterday and will upgrade their skills locally and overseas.

The awards total \$5.7 million, a 28-per-cent increase from last year's \$4.4 million.

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