



Senior staff nurse, Ms Mary Sim with Dr Gregory Chan, Singapore General Hospital

Staying Safe and Healthy in the Healthcare Industry

“Of course” was the resounding answer given by doctors and nurses who were asked this question: “Do you feel that safety is important in the workplace?”

And quite rightly so. As healthcare professionals, doctors and nurses are perhaps the best people to walk the talk when it comes to maintaining a safe and healthy environment for all to work in.

Too often, the issue of safety has been associated only with high-risk industries like the construction sector. Many forget that practising workplace safety should be everyone’s duty, regardless of industry.

And the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), which is in charge of workplace safety and health, has recognised that too. When enacting the new Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Act in March 2006, it announced that the Act will eventually be expanded in phases to protect workers in all workplaces.

In March 2008, the Act will extend beyond traditional factories to cover six new sectors, including hotels, food and beverage and healthcare. The new sectors are expected to follow the WSH Act’s performance-based approach.

This includes reducing risks at source through risk management and encouraging ownership by all stakeholders. The Act also puts in place tougher penalties for poor safety management, which puts workers at risk.

Recognising that some small and medium enterprises (SMEs) may have difficulties coping with the expansion of the Act, the Workplace Safety and Health Advisory Committee (WSHAC) – an industry-led committee formed by MOM in 2005 – have thus devised an industry-led programme, bizSAFE, to teach employers necessary skills to identify workplace hazards.

More help may be expected when the WSHAC is transformed to a full-fledged Council in April 2008 with statutory powers. One of the Council’s key roles will be to help industries like the healthcare sector establish acceptable safety practices. This will elevate overall industry standards and protect employees from work-related accidents.

Healthcare professionals like Dr James Lee of James Lee Orthopaedic Surgery said: “Safety and health affects everybody so we should be vigilant all the time in whichever setting.”

Dr Lee makes sure his staff adheres to safety procedures and frequently reminds them to stay

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alert while carrying out duties like drawing blood from patients.

Dr Yeo Lock Peow, who is with Gethin-Jones Liow and Partners Drs, feels the expansion of the WSH Act is “a good thing”.

Dr Yeo, who works in Nanyang Technological University’s medical clinic, said: “Some injuries people sustain are really unnecessary and very preventable. For example, I have seen people get cut badly at work because they unknowingly walked through a glass door.”

With bizSAFE, the WSHAC hopes to eliminate such needless accidents in all workplaces in Singapore. The bizSAFE programme helps companies acquire knowledge to keep a workplace safe, imparting to them skills like how to carry out risk management and assessment.

This is something Singapore General Hospital (SGH) is already proactively doing. Dr Gregory Chan, a consultant with its Occupational Medicine Unit, Department of Internal Medicine, says besides taking care of patients, his responsibilities include caring for the hospital’s staff too.

Dr Chan, who specialises in occupational health, explained: “I visit the hospital’s various

departments to assess health risks in that particular workplace and recommend programmes for them. For example, we protect our staff working with infectious diseases by immunising and carrying out periodic medical examinations for them.”

Dr Chan said some employers might see safety as a financial cost for them, but added studies have shown implementing workplace safety programmes are cost-effective in the long-term.

Aside from following hospital safety procedures, others like SGH’s senior staff nurse Mary Sim go the extra mile to ensure her safety at work.

Mary said: “Besides the various workplace safety measures taken by the hospital, I read and research on different diseases to expand my knowledge of them.”

But perhaps the best benefit to practising proper safety procedures at work and having an employer who cares for their wellbeing is that employees can work better knowing they are in a safe environment.

Dr Chan puts it aptly: “As a hospital staff, I am happy to know my company cares for my welfare because I can focus on my work and not worry about getting work-related injuries or diseases.” ■