ISSUE 25.2024

National Healthcare Group POLYCLINICS

Transforming PRIMARY CARE

UP CLOSE WITH
A SENIOR MEDICAL SOCIAL WORKER ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PATIENCE AND EMPATHY WHEN CARING FOR PATIENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

IN AND AROUND
NATIONAL DAY AWARDS, NURSES' MERIT AWARD, 'HEALTH COACHING FOR WEIGHT MANAGEMENT' WORKSHOPS AND MORE



STRENGTHENING MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG YOUTH

Amid growing concerns over the emotional and psychological well-being of young people, NHGP is providing targeted intervention and support through the ALERT programme.

2024 APEX® AWARDS FOR PUBLICATION EXCELLENCE



STRENGTHENING MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG YOUTH

Research has shown that one in three Singaporean youths report mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and loneliness. The recent rise in such conditions among youths in Singapore calls for early intervention and support to address them at the root cause. If left unaddressed, these issues can pose a risk to their development and impact their overall well-being.

Taking a proactive stance, the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) has launched the **A**do**L**escent **E**valuation and **R**apid **T**reatment of Mental Health (ALERT) programme to address youth mental health issues at the primary care level. Our cover story, 'An Upstream Approach to Support Youth Mental Health', delves into how NHGP's ALERT programme provides accessible and prompt support, empowering young people aged 13 to 17 to better cope with their conditions early. Launched in November 2021, a key feature of the programme involves Family Physicians identifying at-risk youths, while Medical Social Workers (MSWs) assess challenges and create personalised six-month care plans to meet each youth's specific needs. These plans include counselling and referrals to ensure continuity of care and access to specialist intervention when needed. These collaborative efforts ensure that the identified youths receive the attention they require.

An insightful interview with Mr Elson Liew, Senior Medical Social Worker, Kallang Polyclinic, in *Up Close With* sheds more light on the benefits of the ALERT programme. In sharing his experiences and perspective, he emphasises the importance of balancing the diverse expertise of various healthcare professionals, developing tailored care plans, and maintaining empathy and sensitivity to build strong therapeutic relationships with youths and their families. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in youth mental health care and the critical role that MSWs play in this process.

As the mental health care landscape continues to evolve, it is essential to remain vigilant in supporting the mental well-being of our youths. By fostering a supportive and inclusive environment, NHGP helps young individuals to build resilience and overcome challenges that they face during this critical phase of life.

The Editorial Team

ISSUE 25.2024

CONTENTS

3 **AN UPSTREAM APPROACH TO SUPPORT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH**
A recent study among Singaporean youths showed that about one in three reported internalising symptoms such as depression, anxiety and loneliness. In response to this growing concern, NHGP rolled out the **A**do**L**escent **E**valuation and **R**apid **T**reatment of Mental Health (ALERT) programme to support youths struggling with mental health issues.

6 **IN AND AROUND**
National Day Awards, Nurses' Merit Award, 'Health Coaching for Weight Management' Workshops, and more.

8 **UP CLOSE WITH**
Mr Elson Liew, Senior Medical Social Worker, provides insight into the importance of patience and empathy when caring for patients and their families.

Editorial Team
Johnson Seah
Rachel Tan
Guo Qianping

Contributors
Dr Eugene Chua
Mr Elson Liew

Publishing & Design Consultant
mediacorp

Transforming Primary Care is a quarterly publication by the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics.

© All rights reserved. No part of this publication can be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the publisher.

For all editorial queries and feedback, please email to NHGP_CorpComms@nhgp.com.sg.



Through ALERT, youths with mental health concerns receive comprehensive follow-up care from Family Physicians and Medical Social Workers, tailored to a personalised care plan over six months.

AN UPSTREAM APPROACH TO SUPPORT YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

A recent study[1] among Singaporean youths showed that about one in three reported internalising symptoms such as depression, anxiety and loneliness. In response to this growing concern, the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) rolled out the **A**do**L**escent **E**valuation and **R**apid **T**reatment of Mental Health (ALERT) programme to support youths struggling with mental health issues.

While many of us reminisce fondly on our teenage years, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a time of profound change. Beyond the biological impact of puberty — which brings about physical and hormonal changes — there are dynamic social adjustments, such as moving from secondary to tertiary education and the consequential changes to our social networks. It is also a time of psychological and emotional development as youths learn to form their independent identities, value systems and life goals. Such factors make this phase of life a challenging period for some.



Take 16-year-old Sarah (pseudonym used to protect the patient's identity). After collecting her O-level results, she began to experience bouts of anxiety about her future. Her worrying started to interfere with her daily life.



NHGP and YIJC collaborated on producing posters focused on depression, anxiety and insomnia – conditions that are prevalent amongst youths.

> Opportunistic mental health screening at the primary care level is important. With primary care being the first point of contact for patients seeking care, the ALERT programme enables patients to receive accessible support in a non-stigmatising environment which empowers them to manage their conditions early.
>
> **Dr Eugene Chua**
> Family Physician, Associate Consultant, Co-lead for NHGP's mental health programme

Concerned that she was developing a disorder, she visited an NHG Polyclinic with her mother, and received the care she required through NHGP's ALERT programme.

Sarah's experience is not unique. In recent years, research has revealed that an increasing number of young people are grappling with mental health issues in Singapore. The *Youth Epidemiology and Resilience Study* — a national longitudinal study conducted by the National University of Singapore and published in 2023 — found that one in 10 teens suffer from mental health disorders in Singapore, with 12 per cent of adolescents aged 10 to 18 meeting the full diagnostic criteria for having at least one current mental health disorder.

It was also reported in 2017 that mental illness was the largest contributor to years lost to disease among young people aged 10 to 34 in Singapore, and the second-largest overall contributor across all age groups.

ON THE ALERT AT THE PRIMARY CARE LEVEL

Over the years, and particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, more youths have been seeking help at the primary care level for mental health issues. "Opportunistic mental health screening at the primary care level is important," says Dr Eugene Chua, Family Physician, Associate Consultant, and Co-lead for NHGP's mental health programme. "With primary care being the first point of contact for patients seeking care, the ALERT programme enables patients to receive accessible support in a non-stigmatising environment which empowers them to manage their conditions early."



Developed for youths aged 13 to 17 who are facing mental health issues, ALERT is the first of its kind among polyclinics in Singapore to offer opportunistic mental health screening and timely care. Piloted at Hougang Polyclinic in November 2021, ALERT has been made available across all NHG Polyclinics since April 2023.

Under the ALERT programme, youths presenting with underlying mental health concerns are identified by NHGP Family Physicians. Medical Social Workers (MSWs), who are part of the ALERT team, will engage the youths to assess the challenges they are facing and develop a personalised care plan to facilitate treatment. This personalised care plan includes three to four counselling sessions with the MSW over a six-month duration. "Our clinicians are trained to recognise signs and symptoms of mental health issues and use conversation-starters to encourage youths to share any issues they face," says Dr Chua. These include repeated presentation of various physical ailments such as headaches or abdominal pain, or symptoms suggestive of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, or insomnia during acute visits.

In line with the National Mental Health Competency Framework, members of the ALERT team undergo training with psychiatrists to enhance competencies in providing counselling for youths with mild mental health conditions. "Our Family Physician will manage the youth's biological conditions and acute symptoms, while our MSW provides psychosocial support and counselling sessions to support their emotional well-being," explains Dr Chua. "Our MSWs also provide support to the youth's family members, providing psychoeducation to help them better understand mental health conditions. Family members are equipped with the relevant strategies to help their loved one cope with the conditions."

During the six-month period, the youths' progress is monitored, and they are given advice and resources on how to maintain their mental wellness. This support may also be extended beyond the polyclinic premises, as MSWs coordinate care with a network of other relevant health professionals, social service agencies or school counsellors to ensure continuity of care beyond the clinic setting. The youths may be further assessed by their Family Physician and referred to specialist care should a higher level of intervention be required.

In Sarah's case, she was assessed by a Family Physician to rule out underlying medical conditions. Concurrently, a MSW provided supportive counselling and psychoeducation to help her cope with her emotions. To better support her as she navigated these challenges and feelings of anxiety, the MSW — with consent — facilitated conversations between Sarah and her parents regarding her worries.

Sarah is one of 100 at-risk youths that have benefitted from the timely support and effective intervention provided by ALERT since its launch.

ALERT complements NHGP's existing Health and Mind Service (HMS), which provides primary care mental health services and access to psychological care in the community for individuals aged 18 and above that require continued care for their mental health issues.

INCREASING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH

NHGP has also been directly engaging youths to increase awareness of youth mental health issues and develop further outreach strategies through collaboration with schools. One notable initiative is NHGP's first healthcare-school partnership with Yishun Innova Junior College (YIJC) in 2022. Through this partnership, the ALERT team provided psychoeducation materials and resources to the students, and worked with them to design outreach materials such as posters. These posters, which highlight the warning signs of mental conditions and encourage positive help-seeking behaviours, are displayed within the school and NHG Polyclinics. They have reached nearly 800 users who accessed mindline.sg, a digital mental wellness platform and self-help resource highlighted in the posters. Similarly, NHGP's ongoing partnership with Nanyang Polytechnic's (NYP) School of Engineering involves student-created multimedia content that offers coping mechanisms and educates on various ways to alleviate stress.

Through such collaborations, students are given the opportunity to reflect on mental health issues that they or their peers may be facing, evaluate current resources and actively participate in youth outreach efforts.





The collaboration between NHGP and NYP was aimed at creating multimedia products that increase mental health awareness among youths.

1 The Youth Epidemiology and Resilience Study, National University of Singapore, 2023

NATIONAL DAY AWARDS 2024

19 staff from NHGP were conferred medals at the National Day Awards 2024.

THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION MEDAL (BRONZE)	
Dr Lim Chee Kong	Family Physician, Senior Consultant Director, Clinical Services
THE COMMENDATION MEDAL	
Mdm Er Lian Hwa	Senior Nurse Clinician Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic
THE EFFICIENCY MEDAL	
Mr Jeff Chia Lee Huat	Senior Operations Executive Hougang Polyclinic
Ms Goh Ling Jia	Nurse Manager II Nursing Services
Ms Josephine Goh Min Lee	Principal Medical Social Worker Clinical Services
Ms Heng Sok Hwang	Senior Patient Service Associate Executive Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic
Mr Leo Lim Mun Kuan	Operations Manager Geylang Polyclinic
Ms Nor Diana Binte Togeman	Nurse Manager I Geylang Polyclinic
Ms Lena Phua Yin Han	Executive Operations / Contact Centre
Mr Nicholas Tan Wei Jie	Operations Manager Khatib Polyclinic
Ms Tang Qing Ying	Patient Service Associate Executive Toa Payoh Polyclinic
THE LONG SERVICE MEDAL	
Mdm Azlina Bte Ali	Senior Customer Support Associate Executive Contact Centre
Dr Marvin Chan Chee Leong	Family Physician, Associate Consultant Hougang Polyclinic
Mdm Chong Lee Sze	Senior Staff Nurse I Yishun Polyclinic
Mdm Gurchan Kaur	Patient Care Assistant Geylang Polyclinic
Mdm Salama Binte Ahmad	Senior Patient Service Associate Executive Sembawang Polyclinic
Dr Evan Sim Chin Sing	Family Physician, Principal Staff Geylang Polyclinic
Dr Winnie Soon Shok Wen	Family Physician, Senior Consultant Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic
Dr Donna Tan Mui Ling	Family Physician, Associate Consultant Deputy Director, Clinical Services



NURSES' MERIT AWARD 2024

On 12 July 2024, 150 nurses from various healthcare institutions were presented with the Nurses' Merit Award (NMA) by Minister for Health, Mr Ong Ye Kung. NHGP's Ms Michelle Lee Cai Feng, Nurse Clinician (Advanced Practice Nurse), Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic; and Ms Esther Zhang Kejing, Nurse Clinician, Yishun Polyclinic, were among the recipients recognised for their outstanding service and dedication to the nursing profession. Awarded by the Ministry of Health, the NMA celebrates nurses who have contributed significantly to elevating the profession.



From left: Ms Lim Voon Hooi, Chief Nurse; Ms Esther Zhang Kejing; Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Health; Ms Michelle Lee Cai Feng; and Dr Karen Ng, Chief Executive Officer, NHGP and Chief, Primary Care, NHG.

CELEBRATING NHGP'S PARTNERSHIPS

Since 2022, NHGP's Volunteer Corporate Office (VCO) has been partnering Youth Corps Singapore (YCS) Eldercare Cluster for the 'My HealthHub Buddy' initiative. Under this programme, young volunteers encourage seniors at NHG Polyclinics to utilise HealthHub for managing their health and medical appointments. In acknowledgement of the strong partnership, Ms Tracy Gan, VCO Director, received a token of appreciation from Ms Rahayu Mahzam, Minister of State, Ministry of Digital Development and Information & Ministry of Health, and Chairperson, YCS Advisory Committee, at the YCS 10th Anniversary Carnival at *SCAPE on 6 July 2024. The event was graced by Mr Lawrence Wong, Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, who had supported YCS' establishment in 2014 as the former Minister for Culture, Community and Youth.



Photo: Youth Corps Singapore

VISIT BY SHANGHAI DELEGATION

NHGP welcomed Mr Chen Yujian, the Vice Mayor of Shanghai, and his team of delegates to Sembawang Polyclinic on 4 June 2024. The delegation toured the clinic, led by Dr Irwin Chung, Head, Sembawang Polyclinic, who showcased NHGP's Teamlet Care Model and the clinic's self-service initiatives that helped enhance efficiency. The tour also highlighted the clinic's partnerships with community agencies in Bukit Canberra. In an engaging discussion, Dr Karen Ng, Chief Executive Officer, NHGP and Chief, Primary Care, NHG, outlined the significance of NHGP's role in primary care. Mr Chen highlighted how Shanghai's healthcare system has developed and the city's continuous efforts to advance primary care.



JUNIOR CHEF CHALLENGE

A Junior Chef Challenge was organised by NHGP's Health Promotion and Preventive Care Department (HPPC) at Sembawang Polyclinic's Health and Wellness Studio on 12 June 2024. The participants, aged between 7 to 12 years old, learned about healthy meals based on the 'My Healthy Plate' guide, and formed groups to prepare appetising and delicious dishes. With guidance from the Sembawang Polyclinic team, the event was a success, instilling the importance of making healthier food choices in the young participants.





WORKSHOPS ON 'HEALTH COACHING FOR WEIGHT MANAGEMENT'

From April to June 2024, the Primary Care Academy organised 'Health Coaching for Weight Management' workshops for nearly 60 personnel from the Singapore Armed Forces. At the two-day workshop which was held across three runs, a multidisciplinary team — including a dietitian, Health Promotion Consultant, Family Physician and Public Health Doctor — taught the participants about the essentials of a balanced diet and effective exercises for sustainable weight management. Participants also embarked on an experiential journey designed to help them understand the theory and practice of health coaching.

JOURNEYING WITH THOSE IN NEED

To Mr Elson Liew, Senior Medical Social Worker, Kallang Polyclinic, supporting patients and their families requires patience and empathy — especially when they are young.



Mr Elson Liew
Senior Medical Social Worker, Kallang Polyclinic

My decision to be a Medical Social Worker (MSW) was not the result of a sudden epiphany, but rather a culmination of experiences that made me appreciate the value of social workers. One such experience involved a family friend who required palliative care, but the family struggled to get adequate resources and support to cope. Witnessing this situation, I realised how helpless one can feel in a similar situation, where any help would be appreciated. In my current role — where I can offer both emotional support and practical solutions — I am humbled to be able to help patients and their families navigate the complexities of medical care and find stability during difficult times.

MSWs collaborate with other healthcare professionals and community partners in a multidisciplinary team to deliver patient-centric care. This ranges from providing interventions to address the patients' care needs and concerns, to mitigating potential risks and safety issues, and ensuring continuity of care in the community. MSWs may also offer psychoeducation, where patients and their families learn to navigate challenges and enhance problem-solving skills. I had the opportunity to be part of a project on youth mental health in NHGP. This has deepened my knowledge and understanding of current trends, as well as the impact that these issues have on youth mental health.

The ALERT (AdoLescent Evaluation and Rapid Treatment of Mental Health) programme at all NHG polyclinics ensures that youths receive timely and effective support while reducing barriers and stigma. Under ALERT, Family Physicians screen and identify youths with mental health concerns, while MSWs further assess them through psychosocial assessments. They develop personalised care plans, conduct safety risk assessments and equip these youths and their families with coping strategies. If necessary, MSWs also facilitate the referrals of the youths to a network of health professionals, schools, social service and community partners. ALERT leverages the diverse expertise of different stakeholders to devise a comprehensive and coordinated care plan.

When working with youths, patience is an essential trait. Youths need time to feel ready to share, and may struggle to verbalise their problems, thoughts and emotions. It is helpful to position myself being in a partnership with them during their journey of navigating through their challenges. I start with building a therapeutic relationship — where I listen to, and validate their experiences — allowing them to share at their own pace. At the same time, I remain mindful that each youth is a unique individual with different experiences. Where necessary, I involve family members, a trusted adult or school personnel to support them in their recovery journey.

One recurring issue affecting youth mental health is the emphasis on academic achievement and the immense stress that comes with it. Pushing oneself too hard, high expectations of parents to perform academically, and competition with peers will continue to perpetuate unhealthy levels of stress, resulting in poorer physical and mental health outcomes. Other issues include, but are not limited to, challenges at home such as domestic violence, unhealthy communication patterns with parents, poor parenting styles, bullying, friendship problems and loneliness. These issues can profoundly impact one's emotional distress and behavioural problems. Addressing these issues allows us to create a supportive environment where they can thrive.

Recently, I counselled a youth who was grappling with anxiety. Initially, she was hesitant, withdrawn and even sceptical about counselling. However, she gradually found the sessions effective in helping her to cope with her mental health struggles. Over several months, she made significant progress and reported improved social engagement with her peers. This was an inspiring reminder of how we can make a difference in the lives of youths, one person at a time.

> "When working with youths, patience is an essential trait. Youths need time to feel ready to share, and may struggle to verbalise their problems, thoughts and emotions.

