

New guide aims to curb abuse, harassment of community care workers

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A new guide to protect community care workers from abuse and harassment will be circulated in June to all community care organisations, which include nursing homes and hospices.

Announcing the development of the guide at the Community Care Work Plan Seminar on May 28, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said all community care organisations are encouraged to implement the recommendations.

It is adapted from the standardised framework launched in December 2023 to curb abuse of healthcare workers in public healthcare institutions such as hospitals and polyclinics.

The framework includes a common definition of abuse and harassment, standardised protocols for response, and measures that can be taken against abusers.

The public healthcare clusters have since updated their protocols across their hospitals and institutions to protect their healthcare workers against abuse and harassment, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said in a statement on May 28.

MOH and the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) partnered community care sector leaders over the past year to contextualise the guide for various care settings, such as nursing homes, active ageing centres, hospices, and home care services.

The guide has been adapted to address challenges community care workers face, including safety protocols for home-based care settings where staff work in clients' residences.

Special consideration has also been given to managing situations involving clients with dementia or lower mental capacity, who form a significant proportion of users of community care services.

The initial framework for healthcare institutions came after the Tripartite Workgroup for the Prevention of Abuse and Harassment of Healthcare Workers, set up in April 2022, released its findings from a survey of more than 3,000 healthcare workers and 1,500 members of the public in the second half of 2022.

More than two in three workers had witnessed or experienced abuse or harassment in the year preceding the survey. Among the affected workers, 75 per cent did not report the incidents.

The workgroup comprises representatives from MOH, Healthcare Services Employees' Union, public healthcare clusters, community care partners and private healthcare providers.

Under the framework, abuse and harassment are defined as words, communications, actions or behaviours that are inappropriate, threatening and insulting, and cause a healthcare worker to feel intimidated, alarmed or distressed.

They also hinder staff's ability to carry out their duties. Such cases can occur in both physical and virtual settings.

Depending on the severity of the abuse or harassment, institutions may remove abusive next of kin and visitors from the premises of the healthcare institution, states the guide.

If necessary, institutions may also disengage in communications with abusive visitors and bar them from visiting patients in the hospital for a period of time.

Eldercare service provider Vanguard Healthcare and Ren Ci Hospital were among the organisations that worked with AIC to develop the guide from November 2024.

Mr Jason Lai, head of human resources at Vanguard Healthcare, said the framework provides clarity and consistency in guiding community care organisations to address staff abuse.

As Vanguard's appointed staff protection officer, he ensures that staff who experience abuse or harassment are supported, by listening to their concerns and guiding them through the reporting and resolution processes.

Mr Lai said the new guide will be shared with all staff and incorporated into training programmes, "so that staff know their rights and the support available to them".

Ms Nuryasmin Hannah, human resources director of Ren Ci Hospital, said its staff who work with seniors with dementia and in home care face higher chances of abuse.

She said the guide helps nurse managers assess the situation and determine a course of action, such as using physical restraints on a senior with dementia who attacks a staff member.

Ms Yasmin added that many foreign staff do not report abuse as they fear being sent back to their home countries. She hopes distilling the guide down into "bite-size" training materials will encourage them to speak up about abuse, including being "wrongly touched". "They must know that the organisation is here to support them, and that this is a safe workplace for them."

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