

MEDICAL CARE STANDARDS

Website to put up hospital 'scoreboard'

Cancer support website to collect public feedback on patient services

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FROM time to time, medical professionals may need gentle reminders to show more empathy and care when dealing with patients.

And the founder of a cancer support website hopes to do just that, by helping members of the public send notes to doctors and nurses from public hospitals whom they feel have not carried out their duties well.

So that such feedback does not go unnoticed, the number of such notes — called "Smart Chips" — received by each hospital will be tallied on a "scoreboard" on the website www.cancerstory.com.

Said website founder Lee Soh Hong, 47: "By having members of the public come together to express their concern, I think it will draw the public hospitals' attention and help them realise that they need to do something about their shortcomings."

But the idea has drawn criticism from some medical professionals, who doubt the effectiveness of such a feedback mechanism.

Ms Lee, a freelance accountant, started this initiative following the feedback she received on the book she wrote last year about her father's death and her negative experience with the care he received in a public hospital.

Changi General Hospital chief executive officer T K Udairam felt that the scoreboard created an unfair basis for comparison.

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Lee Soh Hong
founder of
www.cancerstory.com



"Some of the public hospitals are large and see a huge volume of patients, so it's likely they will gather more notes and feedback than other hospitals," he said. Hence, it would be unfair to draw conclusions based on numbers alone.

The hospital has five different feedback mechanisms, all of which are actively used. "We get emails and calls every day," said Mr Udairam.

"It's a complex balance between the patient's expectations and whether we can meet them as a public hospital, and I don't know if this (initiative) can address (the complexities)."

A nurse from a public hospital said she did not understand the need for the initiative, since patients can send their feedback to the hospital or the medical personnel themselves.

"I think it's more sensible to encourage communication between

the public and us," said the 34-year-old nurse, who declined to be named. "This seems roundabout."

Ms Lee acknowledged that the initiative was not a perfect solution. "I have spoken to doctors and nurses I know, and while they were encouraging, they also said that it's up to (individuals) whether they take the message to heart," she said.

"There is no quick fix to influence others, and it will take time for Smart Chips to be successful in reminding doctors and nurses to play their roles professionally. But I think it's worth a try."

Ms Dorothy Tan, 46, an accounts and admin manager and a supporter of the initiative, felt it was a good move.

"It's another outlet for people to make their feelings known and I think it creates a bigger sense of accountability for improvement for the hospitals," said Ms Tan.

SUCCESS OF BOOK SPURS HER ON TO CHAMPION PATIENT ADVOCACY

After eight years of running a resource website on cancer, Ms Lee See Hong, who lost her mother to cancer in 1999, decided to call it a day when her father died last year.

Disappointed with what she considered poor care for her father from a public hospital and stricken with grief, she found herself unable to continue her work on the website. "I couldn't get over it, and until now I still haven't," said Ms Lee.

Instead, she channelled her energy to writing a book — published in January — about her observations on about her father's experience in hospital.

But now, the positive reception to the book *What Killed My Dad? Reflections on How to Make Your Hospital Stay Safer* has galvanised her to embark on a new quest: To improve patient care and safety in hospitals.

"The feedback from both readers and medical professionals made me realise I'm on the right track and I should do something," she said.

Ms Lee's website, www.cancerstory.com, has won her several awards, including an Everyday Hero award from *Reader's Digest* in 2002, and gets 1,000 hits a day.

Since the book's launch, Ms Lee has conducted public talks on patient safety and advocacy, something she hopes to continue to do.

"I think there has to be more patient advocacy done by the public," said Ms Lee.

"My experiences in engaging the institutions and the authorities have been disappointing, and this has made me think we really need to get Singaporeans to come together and make themselves heard, to improve public healthcare for all."