Waking up to sleep disorders

More seeking help; hospitals have had to expand facilities

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The number of people seeking help for sleep problems has gone up significantly over the years, and hospitals have had to bump up their facilities to treat them.

The team of 11 poly and 80 support staff at the Singapore General Hospital’s (SGH) sleep clinic handled 1,836 patients in 2004, and 2,146 in 2007 — a 15-per-cent jump over four years.

The number of in-patient sleep studies, in which patients spend the night hooked up to machines that monitor their sleep patterns, has also gone up by more than half, from 766 in 2004 to 1,386 in 2007.

At the National University Hospital, the number of sleep tests tripled from 186 in 2002 to 411 last year.

It is not cheap to go through this kind of monitoring. Depending on the class of ward, the bill is usually between $600 and $1,500, so monitoring is recommended only for patients with serious sleep problems.

These include having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or having breathing problems like snoring or sleep apnoea.

Sleep disorders can have their roots in stress, shift work, obesity or medical conditions, and are not confined to adults.

KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital’s (KKH) paediatric sleep laboratory, which treats children 15 years and younger, has had to double its number of beds from two to four.

Dr Jenny Tang, who heads respiratory medicine at KKH, said its sleep clinic treats over 1,000 children with sleep problems each year.

About a fifth of them suffer from obstructive sleep apnoea, in which breathing stops repeatedly during sleep, causing arousal, although the child does not actually wake up.

These children, who also usually snore, tend to be fat; more boys than girls have the problem. Toddlers with this problem may be hyperactive in the day.

The National University Hospital has also seen a climbing number of children with sleep disorders; more than 600 had serious problems last year, said paediatric sleep specialist Chin Lew Yil.

Awareness of sleep problems is still low here, even among general practitioners, say sleep doctors. The Singapore Sleep Society recently published a book to fill this information gap for GPs.

Dr Lim Li Ling, president of the society, said sleep problems have to be identified and treated, since the lack of sleep raises one’s risk of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, depression and heart disease.

One of the first affects of the lack of sleep is impaired brain function, said Dr Lim, who is also director of SGL’s sleep disorder clinic.

While the individual can function reasonably well physically, cognitively and emotionally, he may go downhill, she said.

Children, even toddlers, can also suffer sleep deprivation.

Associate Professor Stanley Tay of the National University of Singapore and his team did a study on sleep patterns of pre-schoolers here and found them getting on average one to two hours less sleep than children in Europe.

This is worrying because lack of sleep can make children obese, raise their risk of infections and accidents as well as sap their ability to learn.

Adults and children who get enough sleep tend to think faster, absorb more and make better decisions, Dr Lim said.

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