

# Specialised help for child abuse victims

Psychiatrists, medical social workers, psychologists work together on cases

By **THERESA TAN**

SHE is 15 and appears to be a difficult, defiant teenager. She skips school, clashes with teachers and parents, smokes and drinks, and often stays away from home.

In private, she is plagued by nightmares and often breaks down in tears for no apparent reason.

At the Institute of Mental Health's Child Guidance Clinic, this is a typical example of a girl struggling in silence after years of sexual abuse, often by a family

member.

Child sexual abuse made headlines twice last week, with two young men jailed for preying on young girls.

An army regular, 21, intimidated his 11-year-old cousin into having sex by claiming to be a "Satanist", and scaring her into thinking Satan would haunt her if she did not have sex with him. He also made his 15-year-old girlfriend pregnant and she had an abortion.

Using the same trick, a 25-year-old storeman pretended to be possessed and coerced five girls aged between 12 and 15 into

sexual acts.

The Child Guidance Clinic has a specialised service to treat child abuse victims, and some are as young as seven.

Called the Forensic Rehabilitation, Intervention, Evaluation and Network Development Services - Friends for short - the team has seen about 1,100 patients since it was set up in 2010.

About eight in 10 are victims of sexual or physical abuse.

About two in 10 patients seen by the Friends team are young people caught for crimes such as stealing, rioting and sexual misdeeds, like molestation, exposing their private parts in public or having sex with underage girls.

Most are referred by the police, but some are sent here by desperate parents, who are worried that

their children may get into trouble with the law.

Senior consultant of child and adolescent psychiatry Parvathy Pathy said the hospital had been treating such patients all along, but felt it could do better by forming a team of psychiatrists, psychologists and medical social workers to work together and specialise in this area.

For example, psychologists are better equipped to understand their patients' thoughts, feelings and beliefs with more specialised training.

This enables them to zero in on the thoughts and emotions that are affecting the child more quickly, and address them more effectively, said its principal psychologist Carolyn Kee.

Dr Pathy, who has 22 years of

## WHO THE TEAM SEES

**80%**

Victims of sexual or physical abuse

**20%**

Young people caught for crimes such as stealing, rioting and sexual misdeeds

experience in child psychiatry, said there have been generally more cases of child sexual abuse surfacing over the years, in part because people are more willing to report the crime.

Most sexually abused children stay silent, fearing that no one would believe them if they spoke up, or worse, that they would be punished for it.

"Some men even threaten to kill or hurt them or their mothers if they tell anyone," said Dr Pathy.

Many also experience depression and anxiety.

Most of the time, the abuse comes to light only after the victim confides in a friend and her teacher, counsellor or mother learns of it. Or worse, when the victim becomes pregnant or infected with sexually transmitted diseases.

But these victims can be helped, said clinical psychologist Fiona Tan.

One of the first things she does is to help the children make sense of what they are going through and assure them that what they feel is normal given the circumstances. "Many feel they are going crazy as they don't understand what they are feeling or even doing."

The children are taught coping skills, including relaxation techniques to deal with their anxiety.

Many victims feel guilty and blame themselves, thinking they are somehow responsible for being abused, and the team has to deal with these as well.