

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PSYCHIATRY IN SINGAPORE

Ee Heok Kua MBBS, MD, FRCPsych

Professor and Senior Consultant Psychiatrist  
Department of Psychological Medicine  
National University of Singapore

Correspondence

Professor Kua Ee Heok  
Department of Psychological Medicine  
National University Hospital  
5 Lower Kent Ridge Road  
Singapore 119074  
Email: [pcmkeh@nus.edu.sg](mailto:pcmkeh@nus.edu.sg)

The past two decades have witnessed a gradual transformation of psychiatric service in Singapore from institutional to community care. With clinics in the general hospitals, people with psychiatric problems are now more willing to seek help. In a study of patients with schizophrenia admitted to the mental asylum, Woodbridge Hospital, in 1975, Tsoi et al (1985) found that the majority sought help one to two years after the onset of the illness. In a recent study of schizophrenia in a general hospital - National University Hospital - most of the patients ( 80% ) were seen within 6 months of the illness; and the prognosis was better for those with shorter duration of untreated psychosis ( Kua & Lai, 2003 ).

The most dramatic demographic change in Singapore in the next 10 years is the ageing of the population. Most elderly people with mild or moderate dementia are undetected in primary care partly because the doctors have a large patient load and cognitive assessment takes time. To help with the quick assessment of elderly patients with cognitive impairment we have constructed a 10-item questionnaire called the Elderly Cognitive Assessment Questionnaire or ECAQ that can be used for screening dementia ( Kua & Ko, 1992). The Mini Mental State Examination or MMSE was used previously but it was extremely difficult to administer because of cultural differences, linguistic problems and low literacy in our elderly population. The ECAQ has less cultural and educational bias and is now being used by doctors and nurses in many Asian countries.

Because of the shortage of manpower, we have started a one-year Master of Nursing course ( Mental Health ) to train nurses to manage clinical problems, e.g. suicide assessment, mental status examination, side effects of medications, psycho-education, psychotherapy, etc. The first batch of 8 nurses has graduated and an award for the top candidate was donated by Prof Edmund Chiu from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

The Department of Psychological Medicine, National University of Singapore, is one of the research centres for dementia in Asia. We have published the early papers on the epidemiology of dementia in the Chinese and Malay elderly ( Kua & Ko, 1995) and the stress of family caregivers. To reduce the stress of caring, we piloted a study comparing telephone counseling and email counseling. The results showed that both were useful to reduce the stress of the family but telephone counseling provided a more rapid improvement ( Kua EH, 2003 )

The suicide rate of the elderly was at a peak in 1995, and with the combined effort of the government, non-governmental organisations and mental health professionals, had resulted in a gradual decline in the last few years ( Kua et al, 2003). This success story has lifted the prestige of psychiatry and the mental health profession in the country.

Recently, the thrust of research is on the prodromal symptoms of schizophrenia and our team will be testing out a questionnaire to be in schools. The study by Tan HY and Ang YG ( 2001) showed that even before the onset of florid symptoms, the students had falling grades in mathematics.

There is tacit agreement among the psychiatrists in the Asian region to have regular consultation to co-ordinate training and research. We had a meeting in Kobe University two years ago with Professors Norman Sartorius and Naotaka Shinfuku about studying the prescription pattern of anti-psychotic medications. This project had the participation of Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia

and Singapore. The results of the research project were presented in the World Congress of the World Psychiatric Association at Yokohama in August 2002.

An Asian regional teachers of psychiatry ( TOP ) meeting was held last year with the involvement of our Australian colleagues. In most universities, the recruitment of academic staff is based on their track record in research or academic results, but many may not be good clinical teachers. We realize that poor clinical teachers will put off good medical students from wanting to specialize in psychiatry. We hope in future to have more discussions on curricular matters, teaching or communication skills and examinations.

## **References**

- Tsoi, W.F., Kok , L.P. & Chew, S.K. ( 1985) A 5 – year follow-up study of schizophrenia in Singapore. *Singapore Medical Journal*, 26: 171-177.
- Kua, E.H. & Ko, S.M. (1992). A questionnaire to screen for cognitive impairment among elderly people in developing countries. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 85: 119-122.
- Kua, E.H. & Ko, S. M. ( 1995) Prevalence of dementia in elderly Chinese and Malay residents of Singapore. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 7: 21-23.
- Tan, H.Y. & Ang,Y.G. (2001) First episode psychosis in the military – a comparative study of prodromal symptoms. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35: 512-519.
- Kua, E.H., Ko,S.M. & Ng, T.P. (2003). Recent trend in elderly suicide rates in a multiethnic Asian city. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 18: 533-536.
- Kua, E. H. & Lai, Y. M. ( 2003 ) First Episode Schizophrenia – an NUH study. Paper presented at the World Federation of Societies of Biological Psychiatry Regional Congress, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- Kua, E.H. ( 2003 ) Mental Health and Family Care of the Elderly in Asia. Paper presented at International Psychogeriatric Association Congress, Chicago, USA.