New Straits Times - 4 October 2006 KUALA LUMPUR: There has been a staggering increase • over 300 per cent • in children seeking psychiatric help over the past four years at a local hospital.

Doctors at the Selayang Hospital saw 285 children in 2002, 354 in 2003, 543 in 2004 and 1,079 last year. Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek was certain the number would increase in years to come.

He said this after opening the hospital•s child and adolescent psychiatric clinic. He also jointly opened Anjung Kasih, a home providing temporary accommodation for relatives of in-patients at the hospital, with Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

Kuala Lumpur Hospital child and adolescent psychiatrist, Dr Toh Chin Lee, said stress at school and parents who constantly quarrelled could be among reasons for the increase in mental problems.

"At KLH, we see a lot of children and adolescents with problems and the most common cause is stress at school and at home."

Dr Toh said the examination-oriented education system had led to pressure from parents to perform at school.

"Even if parents say they don•t pressure their kids, children can pick up on their parents• high expectations and, in turn, set high expectations for themselves. When they fail, they take it badly."

Another reason was bullying by teachers, said Dr Toh, who added that there was a small group of teachers "who actually are the cause behind mental illness in students".

"Teachers who physically punish a student for the smallest infringement may have good intentions but actually cause problems in the child."

He said children were often the victims when parents fought.

"Sometimes when parents fight, they use their children as allies. Whether the conflict is mild or severe, it can affect the child in the long or short term," he said.

Another psychiatrist said the large number of child mental patients could also be due to greater awareness of mental illness among parents and doctors.

"We•ve always been short of child psychiatrists. But as more centres open up and people become more aware, more children and adolescents are being sent for treatment," he said.

Meanwhile, Dr Chua had a few tips for parents to identify children needing psychiatric help:

• They are disobedient.

• Do not want to go school.

• Have trouble mixing with siblings and friends.

• Have speech problems.

The child and adolescent psychiatry clinic, called MeKAR, is funded by the National Welfare Foundation and will cater to children aged two to 18. It offers counselling to those from broken homes, speech and occupational therapy besides guidance to parents with such children.

It will deal with children suffering from autism, conduct disorder, depressive disorder, attention deficit disorder and schizophrenia.

On Anjung Kasih, Dr Chua said these transit homes would be set up at major hospitals, including Kuala Lumpur Hospital.

There are no charges, except for a refundable deposit of RM50.