



Transient Workers Count Too
DIGNITY OVERDUE

NEWSLETTER

WEEKLY
DAY OFF
FOR ALL

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Domestic Workers *Still* Need A Weekly Day Off

At the end of June, the new mandatory weekly day off provision for domestic domestic workers will have been in effect for six months.

So how is it working out?

Regrettably, not so well. There seems to have been some increase in the number of domestic workers getting days off, but we also see plenty of indications that for all those in Singaporean society who want to prevent domestic workers having days off, it is business as usual.

If a weekly day off is now a matter of law, how can that be?

Under the terms of the new policy, workers who signed contracts before the end of 2012 were excluded; they have to wait until their contracts are up for renewal for a weekly day off to be included in their employment terms. So, in the worst case, a woman taken on as a domestic worker in December 2012 would have to wait almost two full years to qualify. TWC2 has heard from domestic workers who signed contracts in 2012 and who know domestic workers taken on since January 2013 who have day off clauses in their contracts; they feel unfairly excluded.

Then there is this provision, as reported in the Ministry of Manpower (MOM)'s press release last year:

MOM's approach recognises that some employers may have genuine difficulties giving FDWs a weekly rest day, and that some FDWs may prefer the option to work and earn more by forgoing their rest days.....

If the employer would like his FDW to work on her rest day, he should come to a mutual agreement with the FDW on the number of rest days to forgo each month. For each rest day forgone, the FDW shall be compensated with at least one day's wage on top of her monthly salary;

This sounds even-handed, but workers are rarely in a position to say 'no' to an agreement like this: faced with agents and employers who say that they won't get a job and will have to go home unless they agree, they feel that they have no real choice. This is particularly so for new workers, whose placement costs them eight or nine months of salary deductions by their employers*.

But don't 'no day off' workers gain by having higher pay?

Not necessarily. We hear of cases where employers avoid giving workers higher pay, apparently with advice from agents. It works like this: If an Indonesian worker could have expected to be paid \$450 a month, for example, because that is what fellow nationals received for a month's work, the employer says she will be paid

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Discover Singapore Launched

Discover Singapore is a new TWC2 initiative handled by volunteers. It gives destitute workers a break from the worries of joblessness and having no money. See short report under Events on page two.

If you want to sponsor a meal, a tea or a whole day out, you can contact the organisers at

<DiscoverSingapore@twc2.org.sg>

Heartbeat

Heartbeat is TWC2's monthly gathering for volunteers and people interested in volunteering.

The next session is scheduled for Wednesday, 10th July 2013. If you are interested in attending, please email us at info@twc2.org.sg

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Events

May 18th: The first Discover Singapore day out was an outing to Gardens by the Bay. TWC2 took a group of 25 destitute migrant workers to the park for a day off from the worries and stresses of being jobless and incomeless. They had coffee, toast and cake, generously sponsored by BreadTalk, on their way out at Marina Bay Sands, and they strolled over to Gardens by the Bay. They strolled around the public lawns, looking around, talking and taking pictures and later had a packed dinner and watched the Marina Bay Sands light show. For a fuller report, see:

<http://twc2.org.sg/2013/05/30/twc2-volunteers-organise-maiden-discovery-to-gardens-by-the-bay/>

A second day out took place on Sentosa on 6th June, this time involving six volunteers and 22 workers.

Discover Singapore is a new TWC2 initiative handled by volunteers. If you want to sponsor a meal, a tea or a whole day out, you can contact the organisers at <DiscoverSingapore@twc2.org.sg>

May 24th: 'Where I Was', subtitled 'A Memoir from the Margins' was launched at the Arts House. Over a hundred people were there. The book was written by Constance Singam, one of TWC2's founder members. It is both an account of her life and a reflection on civil society in Singapore, drawing upon Constance's extensive experience. There's a brief reference to the article that she wrote in July 2004 for 'Today' about a large group of unpaid workers who did not have money for food – 'Going Hungry in a Land of Plenty: Modern Day Coolies who are Left High and Dry'. That was the origin of TWC2's emergency fund, now the CAREFund. 'Where I Was' is published by Select Books.

May 25th: 26 students, the Vice Dean and a Lecturer from the Faculty of Law at Udayana University Bali, Indonesia, came to the TWC2 office as part of an academic visit to Singapore. TWC2 President, Dr Russell Heng, spoke to them about TWC2's role and the difficulties faced by Indonesian domestic workers and Ummairoh, President of the Indonesian Family Network, was there to give a first hand account of domestic workers' working conditions. There was a video presentation and a Q&A session, and there was so much interest from the students that what had been planned as an hour and a half hour session grew to three hours.

June 4th: Dr Russell Heng joined a panel discussion titled 'A Bigger Heart' at the National University of Singapore campus. It focussed on how to build a more inclusive society that would take better care of the disadvantaged. About 250 students came to the session, during which Russell showed an automated slide show based on a script written by Shakir Basalamah when he interned with TWC2.

The discussion was part of the annual pre-university seminar organised by the Ministry of Education. This was a four day residential programme for over 500 students from junior colleges and polytechnics, during which the students had to consider the theme, "Singapore 2030: Our Future, Our Home" and set out their own visions and how to achieve them.

History students at NUS published an article on TWC2 in the **April 2013** issue of their magazine: Mnemazine, Issue 4

In Brief

The most up to date figure for the number of domestic workers in Singapore is 209,600. An article in 'Sunday Times' by Amelia Tan (*Myanmar maids finding it hard here, 16th June 2013*), notes that of these, 27,000 are from Myanmar, making them the third largest group of domestic workers by nationality after Indonesians and Filipinas. Ten years ago, there were 140,000 domestic workers in Singapore and the three largest nationalities, in descending order, were Filipinos, Indonesians and Sri Lankans.

The article draws in part upon information provided by the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), which sheltered 64 Myanmar domestic workers who'd fled from their employers in 2012, compared to 29 in 2011 and 13 in 2010. It notes that their placement costs range from \$3,200 to \$3,360 a month, and that they are normally paid \$400 to \$420 a month, compared to \$450 a month for Indonesians and \$500 for Filipinas. An earlier

report by Tan says that Cambodian domestic workers coming to Singapore under a pilot scheme from July this year will be paid between \$420 a month (if without experience) and at least \$450 – at least that is what the Cambodian government has proposed (*Amelia Tan, 'Cambodian maids to earn at least \$420 a month', Straits Times, 30/5/2013*)

These pay differentials by nationality occur with male workers too: Bangladeshi construction workers are on basic pay of \$18 or \$19 a day normally, while Chinese workers are paid at least \$30 a day basic. Such differences are often explained by reference to workers' skill levels, but this is clearly not determined by individual tests or evaluation

TWC2 objects to the practice of paying 'going rates' to workers according to nationality. Pay levels should be determined by skill, experience and length of service, as they would be for Singaporeans.

The International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) links many domestic worker organisations across the world. It campaigns for their rights and calls for governments to ratify and implement International Labour Organisation Convention 189, which covers domestic workers and was approved by the organisation's conference in 2011. It has now been ratified by seven countries: by date of ratification – Uruguay, Philippines, Mauritius, Nicaragua, Italy, Paraguay and Bolivia. More European Union countries should follow soon.

The IDWN's website is: <http://www.idwn.info>



Domestic Workers Still Need a Weekly Day Off (continued from front page)

\$400 a month, because she is having days off, but if she agrees to give up her days off, she'll get \$450. So she does not get any real financial benefit from giving up her days off – just the pay she should have received anyway.

Hold on: doesn't the MOM make it clear that day off money is supposed to come on top of the normal salary?

That's certainly what the new regulation implies: an explanatory note says that 'One day's wage is calculated by dividing the monthly wage by 26 working days', so, in the case above, the worker should have been offered \$450 divided by 26 and multiplied by four (\$522), if she gave up four days off in a month, but this sort of calculation seems to be ignored or evaded in many cases. An employer is free to start off by offering less than the going monthly rate, so there's no obstacle to such coercion.

But focusing on the pay issue gets away from the point that people should be both paid decently and have days off – whoever they are. The reasons why we have argued for a weekly day off for all domestic workers still hold good.

Which are?

The right to rest, to a change of scene, to meet friends, socialize and deal with matters such as buying personal goods or remitting money home. A weekly day off would also allow any worker experiencing difficulties in her workplace, ranging from communication difficulties with her employers to, in extreme cases, physical abuse, to obtain advice and seek help.

Did you only just realize that there were these problems with the new rules?

No. When the new provisions were announced by the Ministry of Manpower in March 2013, we welcomed them, but we recognised their limitations at the time. You can look at our press release of 5th March 2012 at:

<http://twc2.org.sg/2012/03/05/government-making-weekly-rest-day-mandatory-for-foreign-domestic-workers-a-progressive-move/>

There, Dr Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, then TWC2's Vice President, said,

"Whilst I recognize the need to phase in the legislation to give enough time for employers to make the necessary preparation, I would strongly urge MOM to consider that the new legislation should also cover all domestic workers and not only those who are hired from January 2013 onwards. Otherwise, there will be quite a significant population of domestic workers who will have to wait for a considerable amount of time before they have access to this basic labour right. It should also be made clear what the penalty would be if employers do not oblige by the new legislation so that those who are inclined to take this new law lightly will be more wary of the consequences of doing so."

The press release adds: *TWC2 believes that flexibility is needed for both parties to allow, for example, for occasions when families have big celebrations or family members fall ill and the worker's assistance is needed on her usual day off, but it is our view that at least half of all weekly days off should be taken and not surrendered on any terms, so that the workers' health and rights are adequately protected.*

The new regulations have been tried and tested, and many workers continue to be denied a day off. This has to end. We will work with domestic workers, the concerned public and fellow NGOs for all domestic workers to have the right to a weekly day off in practice as well as in theory.

**Unless they are among the very few whose employers cover their placement costs and don't deduct them from their salaries, and those employers would be very unlikely to try to impose 'no day off' clauses on their employees. There is no law on this; it has simply become standard practice since 1997 for employers to pay placement costs and then recover them from workers. If placement costs could be drastically cut, this would allay concerns raised by some employers about their domestic workers 'running away' while they were still recovering costs.*

Singapore Government Should Issue Mandatory 'Stop Work' Order



Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) is gravely concerned that current bad haze conditions will affect the health of workers in many trades, e.g. construction, marine, sanitation, landscaping.

TWC2 strongly urges the government to impose a mandatory Stop Work Order when 3-hour average PSI readings, issued hourly, exceed 200, or when PM2.5 readings exceed 50 micrograms per cubic metre.

We note that the three-hour reading at 11 am on 21 June 2013 was 400 and the PM2.5 reading at the same time was in the range 232 to 297.

We understand that any mandatory stop work order will have effects on contractual liabilities. In this regard, the government has a role to play. It can declare that under Singapore law, courts will accept that Force Majeure is in effect when PSI exceeds 200 or average PM2.5 exceeds 50 and that no liquidated damages or penalties can be imposed on contract parties for delays or non-performance resulting from the imposition of state-wide Force Majeure.

If it is necessary to obtain retroactive legislative approval for such a state-wide declaration, the government should do so urgently.

It is important to free safety managers from any fear of being penalised by their bosses for stopping and delaying work, so that they can carry out their responsibility to workers' safety and health without any conflict of interest.

TWC2 also expects that Stop Work should not only apply to outdoor work, but to any strenuous work (i.e. tasks that lead to breathing heavier than would result from casual walking) conducted in unfiltered air, whether outdoors or indoors.

If any urgent strenuous work is required, e.g. rescue operations, employers should provide workers with respiratory masks, ensuring that they are in good working condition.

Stop Work orders, when mandated, should not be an excuse not to pay workers for the idle time. TWC2 also expects the Ministry of Manpower to enforce the existing regulation that Work Permit holders should be paid at least their basic salaries on days when no work is assigned to them; this rule should apply when the state has issued a Stop Work order.

(From TWC2's Website: <twc2.org.sg>)

Comment: There was no explicit recognition in official statements or in the media up to the time this issue of the TWC2 newsletter was drafted that migrant workers were likely to form a big proportion of those having the most exposure to haze. As we said in the previous issue in connection with work accidents, unless there is a willingness to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of certain conditions on migrant workers, remedial action will be hindered: or is this just a case of the health of migrant workers being less important than that of citizens?

Make the Link

Over 1,100 Bangladeshi garment workers were killed when the building in which they worked collapsed on April 24th.

A few days earlier, Greek police had arrested three foremen who shot (not fatally) 28 Bangladeshi workers protesting over pay arrears. They were employed as strawberry pickers around the village of Manolada.

Bangladeshi work permit holders probably have the worst employment and pay conditions of all male workers in Singapore.

These are parts of a bigger picture: the position of Bangladesh within the global economy.

Bangladesh is among the world's poorest countries. It is now the second largest clothing exporter in the world after China and last year, its garment industry accounted for 80 per cent of its total exports, worth US\$20 billion. There is no big secret about how China and Bangladesh became the giants of clothing production: they had an abundant supply of low cost labour. So mass production was shut down in the developed countries, as retail chain after retail chain sought the cheapest possible producers.

Low cost labour starts out as a product of under-development – or maybe it would be more accurate in the Bangladeshi case to say 'de-development', since Bengal had a flourishing textile industry in the 18th century, when the English East India Company arrived. That industry, based on household production, was devastated by imports of cheap industrially made textiles from Britain. At independence, Bangladesh was left with a large and growing rural population, who were unable to achieve a decent living standard simply by working the land.

Millions, over the years, became migrant workers. They were mostly men, not from the poorest families, but from those with some resources to support them in going abroad to work. They tended to be educated and ambitious – just those who would be in demand in a more developed national economy. The clothing industry, by contrast, now with four million workers, mainly employed women, who are paid less than local men and who could remain based at a family home while going out to work.

Migrant workers might be among the lowest paid in their destination countries, but the pay they were promised still looked good compared to what they knew they could earn at home; a female clothing worker paid at the national minimum wage level might still feel advantaged compared to her sisters at home with no cash income. Most garment workers in Bangladesh are paid the equivalent of US\$38 a month (Bangladesh's minimum wage) or a little more; Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore typically have a basic daily pay of S\$18/US\$14.40; the protesting workers in Greece were demanding their salary of 22 euros a day (S\$36; US\$28.80).

So low living standards and costs and lack of opportunity in Bangladesh was translated into opportunities for wealthier countries. Consumers in the developed world got cheap clothes and the companies that sold them could make a tidy profit. Employers of migrant workers were provided with services that would cost two or three times as much if they had to pay their own nationals to do the work.

It was not enough that past underdevelopment and poverty made Bangladeshi labour appealing to employers and buyers from wealthier countries; to retain its appeal, and so that one Bangladeshi employer might compete with another for an attractive contract, costs had to be held down. Migrant workers who are paid little may more easily be persuaded to work long hours of overtime if that is the only way to compensate for the inadequacy of their basic pay; if employers can get away with poor safety standards and thus keep their costs down to be more competitive whatever the price to their workers, many will do so – indeed they will argue that they have no alternative, as this is what their business rivals do.

This will change. The Bangladeshi clothing industry has seen repeated strikes over pay and conditions. It will be hard for retail chains to find yet more low paid workers elsewhere in the world as an alternative. Consumers, whether they be buyers of clothes or of buildings constructed by migrant workers, can help by refusing to be complicit in the kind of exploitation of Bangladeshi workers that has occurred up to now. They can demand that labour standards be respected and decent salaries be paid, and refuse their custom to those who do not cooperate. It should not be acceptable to have prosperity and ease at the cost of others' hardship and blood.

John Gee

Seen in Taipei Airport: A large poster in a busy public walkway placed by the Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, saying, "We serve foreign workers, local employers and the general public."

The poster provides a number (1955) for a free Foreign Workers' 24-hour hotline.

Couldn't Singapore have a 24 hour hotline for migrant workers too – as well as publicity at Changi Airport, where thousands of workers might see it on their way through?

Sundays Off– So much more than just a day out at Lucky Plaza

The mandatory off day has always been a hot topic amongst employers and foreign domestic workers (FDWs). It is not uncommon to hear employers say that they are reluctant to give their helpers a day off because it will be 'wasted' at Lucky Plaza or that their helper will just get up to no good with her boyfriend.

Personally, I believe that as long as FDWs deliver on their work commitments, employers should not have the right to dictate what these women chose to do on their off days. Just as how we would not allow our bosses to question us about what we do during our off days, employers of domestic workers should not have the right to police their activities.

However, in a bid to showcase how inaccurate it is for employers to assume that FDWs are never interested in self-improvement, I met with three different organisations that run Sunday classes for domestic helpers to find out more about the classes and the students who attend them.

I also briefly explored whether the organisations felt that the mandatory off day ruling has had an effect on them.

About the Organisations

GoForth Training Services

Pastor Rey Navarro is the founder of GoForth Training Services. He first came to Singapore as a student in a local seminary. During his time here, he noticed that many FDWs in his congregation often had questions about the use of computers. In order to help equip these women with computer literacy skills, Pastor Rey purchased seven used PCs and with the help of a church member started running classes in church.

Pastor Rey began to add more classes to the schedule after the Embassy of the Philippines approached him to assist in their aim of giving FDWs the opportunity to enrich themselves on their off days.

What started as a church project quickly took off and as the demand for classes grew, Pastor Rey moved them to a rented space in Eunos: GoForth Training Services was born.

Apart from computer literacy courses, GoForth's course schedule has since grown to include Nursing Assistance, Basic Financial Management & Entrepreneurship and Tourism & Hospitality. All of GoForth's classes are taught by industry professionals and are held on alternate Sundays at Bestway Building.

The cost of attending GoForth's classes is either \$85 or \$100, depending on the duration of the entire course. First time students also have to pay an additional registration fee of \$50 for administration costs, their student ID and uniform.

One of the more popular courses taught at GoForth Training Centre is Nursing Assistance. While students do not graduate with professional certification, Pastor Rey says graduates have informed him that the knowledge and skills they have gained from the classes have helped them to build a foundation to work towards future careers as caretakers.

Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People Training Centre (ACMI Training Centre)

The Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI) is a ministry commissioned by the Catholic Archbishop of Singapore. The aim of ACMI is to respond to the pastoral needs of all migrants and itinerants in Singapore regardless of race, language or religion¹.

One of the services it provides is the ACMI Training Centre. ACMI employee Kathy Deng was kind enough to take some time out of her schedule to tell me a little more about it.

The ACMI training centre was first started to equip the FDWs with livelihood skills and the skills to perhaps start their own business upon their return to their home countries. Cooking classes were also conducted to help domestic workers learn how to cater to their employers' palates.

Over the years, ACMI Training Centre has continued to add classes to its schedule and now conducts a wide range of classes ranging from English and computer classes to dressmaking and beauty & wellness classes.

Lessons are currently held every Sunday with students attending on alternate weeks but in view of the weekly off day and

starting from September 2013, classes will be conducted on a weekly basis thus shortening the training time from six months to three months. This pilot program will continue if it proves to be popular.

With the exception of English classes that cost \$90, all other classes conducted by the ACMI Training Centre cost \$100 with additional costs charged for courses that require starter kits and materials. New students will also have to pay a registration fee of \$15 for a vest and photo ID.

Kathy said that last term saw an enrolment of close to 500 students and that classes are filled up very quickly at each enrolment. She also mentioned that Caregiving, Computer and Beauty & Wellness classes seem to be very popular with the students.

Kathy also said that Hair Dressing and Beauty & Wellness students have mentioned plans to return home to set up businesses with their newly acquired skills. Kathy has also heard of graduates from ACMI's Small Business Enterprise course who have gone on to set up their own businesses upon returning home.

aidha

aidha was started in 2006 by Dr Sarah Mavrinac. It aims to help end the cycle of poverty for domestic workers through financial literacy and entrepreneurship.

I spoke with Veronica Gamez, executive director of aidha, who explained to me the core focus of aidha and why the school functions a little differently from other training centres.

Veronica said that the focus of aidha is to help students create a sustainable wealth creation system. The courses taught in the school help the women to build the right foundations to utilize skills that they already have or may acquire in the future. aidha believes that without building these crucial foundations, FDWs will find it very difficult to gain control over their earnings and to open lines of effective communication with their families back home.

The aidha curriculum consists of two modules. Each module lasts 9 months and consists of 2-3 courses.

Module One is Finance & Technology. The courses in this module focus on money management, communication skills and computer workshops. In order to ensure that students maximize their learning potential at aidha, students are only allowed to move on to Module Two (Entrepreneurship & Business Management) upon completion of Module One.

Module Two's focus is on teaching students what to expect when starting up and running their own businesses. They are also exposed to in-depth business and management training and taught risk assessment and management.

Courses are designed for action learning. As aidha believes that the transfer of knowledge comes not only from the mentors of the classes but also from the students themselves, mentors are not there just to be teachers but also to help guide the interaction and to provide structure to the knowledge exchange.

Veronica shares many success stories of aidha graduates with me. There is Julianna who returned to India to set up a childcare centre, Shety Inah who set up her own internet café, Jocelyn who not only bought a taxi to manage but also an apartment to rent out: the list goes on.

Despite all these great stories of women finding success with the help of aidha's curriculum, Veronica says that what moves her the most is when graduates stay in contact with aidha and offer help and support to existing students.

Impact of the mandatory off day ruling on the organisations

Apart from finding out more about these organisations and the classes they teach, I also asked the organisations if they have felt any impact following the mandatory off day ruling, which came into force at the start of this year.

All three organizations said that courses have always been in demand and spaces for classes are often filled up quickly. Thus, at this point in time, it is still quite hard to ascertain if the ruling has fueled an increased demand for classes.

Pastor Rey said that before the ruling, about 80% of the enquiries GoForth Training Centre received were from domestic helpers themselves. However, since the beginning of this year he has noticed that more employers have started calling on behalf of their domestic helpers.

I wondered: Are more employers calling because the domestic helpers themselves are saying that they'd like to pick up new skills on their off days or because employers are trying to retain control over what domestic helpers do with their day off?

As I thought about this, I couldn't decide if this was a positive or negative shift and asked Pastor Rey for his opinion.

He remarked that it is hard to tell but that the distinction really lies in the employer's motivation for making the enquiries.

Pastor Rey tells me about an email he had received in which an employer asked GoForth to ensure that her domestic helper's attendance was tracked and that the domestic helper attended every class.

Pastor Rey also mentions that he has noticed that some FDWs have yet to be given a weekly off day.

Kathy says that in her experience, employers have always played an active role in enquiring about ACMI's classes on behalf of their domestic helpers. She has yet to face any employers not allowing their FDWs to attend classes but does mention that she has come across instances of FDWs finding it hard to attend classes as they are still expected to do chores at the beginning of their off day. In these instances, it is more accurate to say that these women only have half the day off to themselves.

Veronica from aidha felt that it is still too early to accurately deduce if enrolment trends are due strictly to the MOM ruling or if other factors have contributed to it, as aidha's own marketing and communication strategies for the year were unrolled before the new ruling had had time to have an impact.

Conclusion

It seems that even though the mandatory day off ruling has been in effect for six months, the situation still has to be closely watched. There are domestic helpers who have signed their new contracts before January 2013 and will not get to enjoy the mandatory off day clause unless their contracts are adjusted.

It would also be helpful to take note just how much control employers have of the women's off days. While legally bound to give them the days off, will employers try to compel domestic workers only to take part in activities of which they approve?

While the ruling was definitely a step in the right direction, changing the mindsets of employers who do not trust their FDWs and think only the worst of them is still something that needs to be worked on. Hopefully as time goes by, we will see a positive shift in these attitudes.

Author's Note: I spoke to these organizations over the months of April and May and may not be updated on their latest findings.

¹ From AMCI's official website, 'About Us' <<http://www.acmi.sg/node/3>>

Nicolette Stewart

Helping to Ease the Stress of Complicated Hospital Appointments

Characterised by long waits, confusing instructions and complicated medical jargon, hospital visits are something that many of us dread. When you add in language barriers, payment issues and being involved in a completely unfamiliar system, it is no wonder that many Special Pass holders find hospital appointments especially harrowing.

Even though a visit to the hospital is never fun, these appointments are very important and must not be taken lightly. Not only do the appointments ensure that injured workers receive the medical care and attention they need, but information from these visits often plays a pivotal role in the processing of the men's Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA) assessments. Thankfully, there are volunteers who help take the edge off these hospital visits.

Debbie Fordyce, who spearheads the Cuff Road Project, and a long time volunteers such as Balam regularly accompany workers with complicated cases to their hospital appointments. As each hospital visit often takes an average of three to four hours, there are a limited number of men that can be helped by each individual. Thus, more helping hands are always welcome.

In May this year, Tuan and Daniel started focusing on helping with these hospital visits. Led by the advice of Debbie and other experienced volunteers, Tuan and Daniel now assist in organizing a growing team of individuals who have also come forward to help provide this valuable service.

In order to make the most of each hospital visit, volunteers first conduct a pre-appointment meeting with the injured worker. During this meeting, details about the man's case and any information obtained from previous doctors' appointments are discussed. These meetings helps volunteers gather, condense and digest information about specific cases.

Knowing about the case ahead of time ensures that once at the hospital, volunteers know what information to convey to the doctors and can help move the appointment along smoothly. These pre-appointment meetings also help the men and volunteers find out more about each other and bond in a less stressful environment.

Tuan and Daniel have noticed that doctors are often initially nonplussed to see volunteers enter the consultation room with the patient. However, they quickly warm up to the idea when they realise that the volunteers are there to help both doctor and patient make the most out of the appointment.

Having a volunteer attend the appointment with the men is exceptionally helpful when they are faced with complex medical issues that require detailed explanations.

Volunteers help reduce the amount of time that may have been spent trying to bridge communication barriers. This frees up time for the doctors and allows them to focus on delivering important information and answering questions.

Volunteers can also help the men effectively communicate any concerns they may have about their conditions or medical treatment. Sometimes simply having someone there to chat with while waiting helps alleviate anxiety and allows for the man to be more clear-headed when it comes to his turn to see the doctor.

Volunteers also help the men with payment issues that may arise at the end of the visits.

Tuan and Daniel say that hospital staff are generally quite empathetic towards the men's situations. They understand that these men are often victims of undesirable circumstances and are not out to circumvent the system.

Tuan and Daniel recount an experience with a senior doctor from National University Hospital (NUH) that has left a lasting impression on them.

The senior doctor had advised that proper nutrition was important for the patient's recovery. Upon learning from the couple that the patient's living conditions made it very difficult to achieve a balanced diet, the senior doctor instructed the junior doctor on duty for the day to personally write to MOM in the hopes that a showing of support for the worker would help move the case along more quickly.

Errant employers are Tuan and Daniel's greatest source of frustration and when I press to find out if there is anything else that annoys them, it takes them a while to think of something. Finally, they mention that occasionally they do feel a little disappointed when men are not punctual or skip their appointments without letting them know in advance. That being said, the couple maintains that these occurrences are sometimes caused by miscommunications and that the men are often so sweet and polite that it is impossible to stay angry with them.

Tuan shares that she feels that no hospital visit is ever wasted. Even if obstacles are encountered and things do not turn out as expected, volunteers are able to view those experiences as learning points and are glad simply to be able to provide some support for the men.

Tuan and Daniel tell me about Manik, the first injured worker they had accompanied to the hospital. Even after Manik's case was resolved, he made it a point to keep in contact with the couple and called them from the airport to thank them for all their help. Once he was back in Bangladesh, Manik even placed a long distance call to Tuan and Daniel to express his gratitude again and to issue them an invitation to visit him when they get the chance.

Apart from pre-appointment meetings and the actual appointment itself, follow up work is also done to ensure that calls are made to MOM, hospital bills are paid and employers are fulfilling their responsibilities to the men. Daniel also regularly sends emails to the rest of the team to keep them in the loop about individual cases.

While the time spent helping these injured workers certainly does add up, it is obvious from my conversation with Tuan and Daniel that they and the rest of the volunteers on their team truly enjoy the work they do.

The team could currently still use some extra hands. If you would like to get involved, please contact Tuan and Daniel at tuandan@singtel.com.sg for more information. It would be helpful to note that these hospital appointments usually occur during office hours and would thus probably be a better fit for volunteers who work flexible hours.

Nicolette Stewart

William Pickering was a 19th century British official in Singapore. Through working in China, he had learned to write and speak Mandarin as well as several dialects including Teochew, Hokkien and Cantonese. He came to Singapore as Chinese Interpreter to the Straits Settlements government.

One morning, he heard that there had been a riot in Market Street, so he hurried there to find out what had happened. Arriving at the junction of Market Street and Boat Quay, he found that the riot was over, but bystanders told him that the trouble started because some sinkhehs (Hokkien word for 'new arrival', commonly used at the time to refer to Chinese immigrants) refused to go on board a vessel on the river.

He went to the "Public Offices" nearby, where he heard that the riot was over and that 20 or 30 Chinese had been arrested and several had been severely beaten. He saw some injured men for himself.

"After their wounds were dressed, their names were taken down and we discovered that they had only been landed a day or two from Hainan Junks, and after being shut up closely in a house in Teluk Ayer, they had been disposed of to the Chinese Agent of a Dutch gentleman for \$35 dollars each to work in Sumatra.

These men are for the most part natives of the interior of China. They all cried most piteously for protection, as they declared that they had been induced to leave their homes by promises to the effect that they should be brought to Singapore only, and receive good wages as carpenters, sawyers, brickmakers etc, and that after paying a very low sum for their passages, they would soon save money enough to send to their friends or to return home with. They had heard that instead of this, they were being sent to work in the tin mines of another country, so refused to go on board the Tongkangs. On this, the Emigration Agents or khehtows had threatened them with punishment by our officials, and had beaten them."

Having taken down statements from the workers, Pickering wrote, *"I think these plainly show that the system under which at least Hainan junks bring down the Chinese Immigrants is little short of slavery."*

Pickering and a Major Dunlop went to the Telok Ayer house where the men had been confined in a room in the top storey of the building. The major described it as 'not fit to keep pigs in.'

So, in 1877, Pickering wrote an account of migrant workers being recruited by deception in their home country, lied to about how easily they could earn money to pay off their expenses, kept locked up on their arrival in Singapore, told they had to do other work than they'd agreed to do in the first place and faced violence at the hands of men attempting to load them onto transport out of Singapore. Does any of this sound familiar in 2013?

Pickering ascribed what he had found to 'our over anxiety not to interfere with the liberty of the Chinaman, and to abstain from vexatious regulations, which might impede free immigration of labour into these colonies,' but he urged that immediate action should be taken to give protection to newly arrived Chinese migrants. Shortly after, he was appointed the colonial government's first Protector of Chinese.

(All quotations from W. A. Pickering, "Report by Mr Pickering on Kidnapping Sinkhehs ", a paper laid before the Legislative Council in February 1877. Extended extracts were reproduced in 'Travellers' Tales of Singapore', (Compiler: Michael Wise, 1985)

John Gee