

New guidelines to help detect smoking-linked disease early

MOH advises GPs to test those 35 and over with chronic cough

BY LEE HUI CHIEH

DOCTORS here, especially general practitioners, are now advised to give a "breath" test to patients aged 35 and above with chronic cough or breathlessness.

This will help doctors detect earlier patients suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary dis-

ease (COPD), a group of lung diseases which usually result from smoking, including chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

Damage to the lungs from the condition is largely irreversible, but early diagnosis, cutting out smoking and medication can mean longer lives and better quality of life.

The recommendation is a key feature in a set of new guidelines released by the Ministry of Health to all doctors here on how to diagnose and treat the condition, in time for World COPD Day today.

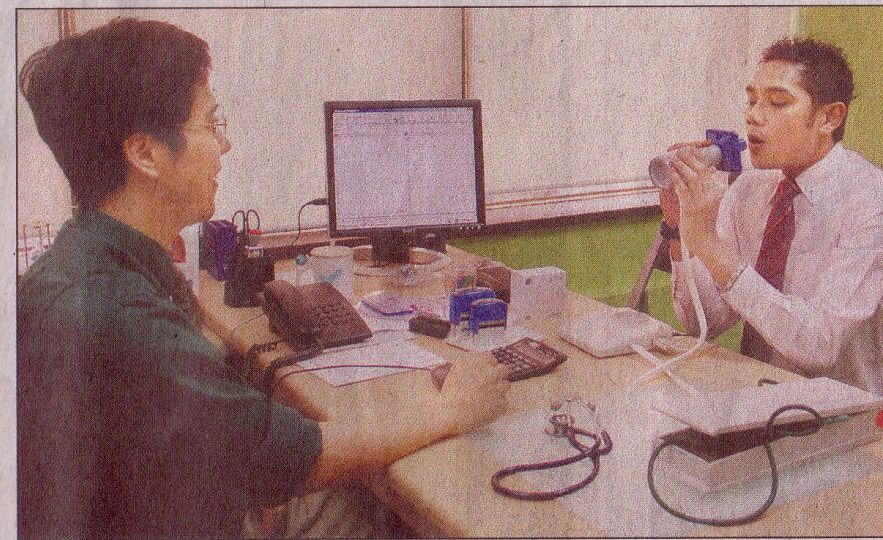
It was launched on Sunday by

the ministry's director of medical services, Professor K. Satku, at a briefing attended by 240 doctors.

It also advises doctors on smoking cessation, nutritional therapy and end-of-life care for patients.

An estimated 4.5 per cent of the population here aged 40 and above suffer from COPD. The absolute patient number is expected to rise, as the population ages and those who began smoking in the 1970s start showing symptoms.

Without any guidelines, many COPD patients go undiagnosed or are treated as asthmatics as the symptoms are similar, said the



EARLY ALERT: Dr Ong (left) watches a spirometry test demonstration where the patient blows into a device that measures the volume of air he expels.

chairman of the 12-member workgroup that drafted the new guidelines, Dr Tan Boon Yeow. The number of sufferers who are undiagnosed here is not known. But in the United States, it could be up to 50 per cent of patients.

Most patients are diagnosed only after being hospitalised with lung infections, said the workgroup's vice-chairman, Dr Ong Ki-

an Chung, a consultant respiratory physician who is also president of the COPD Association.

The number of such admissions is on the rise. Last year, COPD-related conditions accounted for 10,205 hospitalisations, up from 9,301 in 2004. It is the seventh leading killer here, causing 562 deaths last year and 495 in 2004.

A test that checks if the pa-

tient's lungs are working well, known as a spirometry test, would help doctors diagnose COPD.

The patient blows hard into a device. Unlike healthy people, COPD sufferers cannot expel 80 per cent of the total volume they exhale within the first minute.

The test costs between \$18 and \$40 in hospitals and polyclinics.

The guidelines will alert GPs to look out for COPD in older patients, and hopefully, more will refer them to polyclinics or hospitals to get the test done, Dr Tan said.

Dr Tan, who heads medical services at St Luke's Hospital, is also a member of the College of Family Physicians, which mooted the guidelines.

Family physicians are very important in early diagnosis because they tend to see the patients first, said the college's president, Professor Goh Lee Gan.

Mr Tai Chun Choi, 72, was diagnosed early – 20 years ago. He stopped smoking immediately and is on medication, and he can still take 15-minute walks every day without much difficulty.

He said: "When the doctor said my lung damage would worsen, I gritted my teeth and quit."

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