

Hiring a health risk

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Although foreign workers undergo medical screening within a month of landing in the country, the tests are insufficient to detect communicable diseases that may have a window period of between two and six months.

By K. S. USHA DEVI and RASHVIN-JEET S. BEDI

H. S. LEE (not his real name) engaged a new maid to care for his two children from late last year. After the initial payment of RM2,000, Lee waited for the arrival of the maid, which took about two months.

A quiet and reserved person, the 30-year-old maid, whose name is Niah, took care of the children aged two and four years. Everything seemed fine until one day when Lee casually enquired about her family back home in Indonesia. Niah informed him that she had arrived in Malaysia one week after her medical screening test was done in Indonesia.

screening in their country of origin, a would-be-worker is not left in isolation or abstinence before he steps into Malaysia. And this could possibly leave him susceptible to any kind of infection.

Subsequently, when Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek was in Jakarta recently to meet up with his counterpart, Indonesian Health Minister Siti Fadhillah Supari, he also touched on the issue of communicable diseases and foreign workers in Malaysia.

Dr Chua acknowledged that communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV and Hepatitis B could be contracted by a would-be-worker after undergoing his medical test from his country of origin. However, he said, this occurrence is in very small numbers.



Taking precaution: As young children are left in the care of a maid all day, it is important that the maid is free from any transferable disease.

Within a month of her arrival here, Lee recalled that Niah had also undergone another medical screening at a clinic under the jurisprudence of Fomema (Foreign Workers Medical Examination Monitoring Agency).

Obviously, she had passed her test and was judged fit for employment.

Lee, however, still felt uneasy about the maid's health.

"I realised that if she had a communicable disease such as HIV or Hepatitis B, it would not have been detected," he said.

Thus, to take extra precautions, Lee said he would take her for another medical check-up after three months to ascertain that she is not carrying any diseases that could infect or cause health problems for his family.

Subsequently, this will incur costs out of his own pocket but for Lee this is the least of his fears.

"I don't want to jump to conclusions and have any pre-conceived notion about the state of her health but I am a little worried," said the 34-year-old accountant.

"My small children are in her care the whole day, so it is important that the maid is free from any transferable disease that could harm them," he said.

Lee's worries are not unfounded, as foreign workers who come in from other countries are liable to bring diseases which they themselves are unaware of despite undergoing a double medical screening first in their country of origin and then in Malaysia.

Moreover, after undergoing medical

very small numbers.

But he stressed that any foreign worker found to have contracted communicable diseases and had fake medical documents would be sent home and not allowed to work in Malaysia again.

»We are tied by cost and the fact that not all diseases can be screened«

OFFICIAL OF DISEASE CONTROL DIVISION

Chief executive officer of Fomema, See Ah Sing, said that as of Aug 1, 2005, all foreign workers have been medically screened in their country of origin before being admitted into Malaysia.

"Once they are in Malaysia, they are expected to do their medical screening with the clinic listed under Fomema within a month of their arrival," he said.

"This means they undergo a double medical screening," he added.

But he agreed that if the worker had contracted a communicable disease such as HIV just before coming to Malaysia, it would be undetected because of the window period. HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B

both have a window period of two and six months respectively. A window period is the time period between when a person is actually infected and when antibodies can be detected in the test.

"What Fomema does is a comprehensive screening test and not a diagnostic test, but it does encompass many tests," he stressed.

According to See, both medical screenings follow a standardised format stipulated by the Malaysian Health Ministry. The listings on the medical examination can be found at the Fomema website: www.fomema.com.my

The tests consist of a few parts, namely the medical history, physical examination, systemic examination, laboratory test and x-ray examination.

"And as far as Fomema is aware, the medical screenings done in the country of origin are similar to the one done by Fomema," he said.

An official of the Disease Control Division of the Health Ministry said medical screenings have a sensitivity of 98%, which is considered to be "very good".

Sensitivity refers to the statistical measure of how well the screenings pick up certain conditions or diseases.

The main diseases the Ministry is worried about are those endemic to the country of origin, such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B.

"You have to remember that we are tied by cost and the fact that not all diseases can be screened," he said.

The medical test is priced at RM190

for females and RM180 for males.

Out of the one million Indonesian workers who come into Malaysia every year, about 25,000 or 2.5% fail the screenings, he said. This includes women who are pregnant and Hepatitis B is the cause of 50% to 60% of the medical failures.

"We take all the precautions we can. The bigger problem is the deportation. We are aware of cases where the employers are informed but they don't take steps to deport. There are others where the workers run away," said the official.

Another precaution the Ministry takes is contact tracing. This is where people who have come in close contact with anyone with communicable diseases are tested.

The government is making a serious effort to eradicate communicable diseases, said Datuk Dr Teoh Siang Chin, president of the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA), but everyone also needs to play a part.

"Since these are lifestyle diseases, we need the government, employers, physicians and other stakeholders to stress on health education - monogamy, barrier methods, etc. Health education materials need to be in the language of the different countries of origins of the workers," he said.

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Maids are not quarantined

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Safety first: Although maids hired through agencies are usually more expensive, they are safer to hire says the Malaysian Association of Foreign Maid Agencies.

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Maids are not quarantined

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FOREIGN maids do not have to be quarantined in their country of origin, Datuk Raja Zulkepley Dahalan, president of the Malaysian Association of Foreign Maids Agencies (Papa) said.

According to Zulkepley, maids from Indonesia undergo medical screenings at their village before they are recruited. Once the agent recruits them, they are placed in hostels also known as "penampungan."

Here, they undergo training pertaining to their future job — be it cooking, cleaning or taking care of children. They also undergo another medical screening, pre-departure orientation and competency exams. During this time (about 60 days) there is no provision for them to be quarantined in the hostel.

"They travel very far to Jakarta so they are more or less quarantined. We can't control them, however, if they want to go back to their children and husbands during this period," he said.

There are no such hostels in the Philippines. As for medical tests abroad, there are no ways of determining their validity.

"The medical procedures over there have nothing to do with those here (Malaysian side). It's up to their government to endorse the clinics," said Zulkepley.

In 2006, there were about 320,000 legally employed maids in Malaysia. The bulk of them are Indonesians who make up 90%, followed by the Philippines with 8%, Cambodia with 0.5% and others at 1.5%.

A manager from a leading maid agency who requested anonymity admitted there was no way of ensuring the health of

the maids.

"We don't know how the agencies there operate and the lifestyle of the maids. We don't know if the agents are telling us the truth.

"All we know is they are responsible for taking care of the maids from the moment they are recruited until they depart.

"We can't fly there to see if they are telling us the truth. We also don't want any problems on our side. After all, we are spending so much on their airfare and other expenses," said the manager, who added that they would have to bear part of the cost if the maid was found to be unfit later.

There are two ways of bringing maids into Malaysia — through agencies and via individuals, and there are about 420 maid agencies in Malaysia.

But Zulkepley attributed most of the problems to maids who were brought in by individuals, some of whom do it illegally.

"They (maids) might not have proper training. How sure are we about the validity of the medical tests as well," he asked.

Maids hired through agencies usually come with a three-month guarantee. If they are ill, they will be replaced although the levy is to be paid by the client.

"My advice will be to get the maids through agents. It might be more expensive but the quality is guaranteed. Papa supports the government procedures. The members follow the rules and ethics. Safety of people is something we can't take a chance with," added Zulkepley who wants the government to restrict the bringing in of maids to agencies only. — **By RASHVINJEET S. BEDI**