

## **Injured workers tell stories of leave denied**

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### **TWC2's check with 150 injured workers finds nearly 1 in 3 got less leave than warranted**

When construction worker Bolai Kumar Ghosh, 42, injured his left wrist in a worksite accident in May last year, his employer took him to a clinic in a well-known private hospital.

The Bangladeshi, whose work involves lifting heavy loads, was given just two days of medical leave and five days of "light duty".

After a week, still in pain and fearing that returning to work would worsen his injury, Mr Ghosh returned to the clinic but he was not given more medical leave.

He eventually sought treatment at Singapore General Hospital, where he underwent tests and was given 76 days off plus six months of light duty. He has also been offered \$8,400 as compensation.

The worker, who has been here for 16 years, believes the clinic gave him only two days off initially so his bosses could avoid reporting his accident to the Ministry of Manpower.

Last Friday, migrant workers' group Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) checked with about 150 injured Indian and Bangladeshi workers in Little India and found that 42 – roughly one in three – received fewer than four days' medical certificate (MC) after being taken to a private clinic or hospital. All the men then sought treatment at restructured hospitals, where they were given an average of 94 days' medical leave for the same injury.

Accidents must be reported only if a worker gets more than three consecutive days off.

Several of the men, including Mr Ghosh, echoed their complaints to The Sunday Times.

In the worst cases reported to TWC2, workers claimed they were given fewer than four days off even after suffering fractures, amputations and undergoing surgery.

In the wake of such complaints, the Health and Manpower ministries wrote to all doctors last month to remind them of their duty to give injured workers the medical leave they deserve.

Doctors have also been warned that they might face disciplinary inquiries if they fail to do

so.

Groups such as TWC2, which have long sounded the alarm on such alleged malpractices, welcomed the government action. “This is a longstanding problem that has not gone away,” the group’s vice-president, Mr Alex Au, told The Sunday Times. “We are glad that MOM and MOH are paying attention to it.”

Referring to TWC2’s checks with workers, he said that on the basis of the initial MCs given by the private clinics or hospital, one-third of all employers involved would be freed from having to report the accident to the work safety authorities.

“This is quite shocking,” he said. Of the 64 men sent to a private hospital first, almost all were later treated for the same injury at a public hospital. “That is a colossal waste of health-care resources,” said Mr Au.

Another migrant workers’ group, Healthserve, said roughly one in five of 180 injured workers it has helped since January last year also reported receiving only a few days of medical leave at private clinics, compared to weeks or even months off at restructured hospitals.

If doctors are giving injured workers too few days off to help employers, it may not be only to help the bosses avoid reporting accidents.

Leave might also be cut short so that employers do not have to pay workers when they are not working. Under Singapore laws, workers must be paid while on medical leave.

Chinese carpenter Zhang Feng, 46, got three months of medical leave after fracturing his leg in March.

He needed surgery and two metal clips were inserted. But although he was still in pain and could barely walk, his company doctor refused to extend his medical leave.

He went to Tan Tock Seng Hospital which, after tests, extended his MC by another 40 days.

He said: “I work so hard for the company, but they did not care for my welfare.”

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