

LONG MCS

Employers not unduly worried

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DOCTORS have been advised to give adult suspected H1N1 patients seven days' medical leave while the prevalence of cases is expected to

peak within two weeks.

How prepared then are companies for the possibility of more staff being out of action for longer periods of time?

Some firms told TODAY they do not expect a spike in the number

of employees falling sick, but that they are prepared for such an eventuality.

"I think we won't be that affected. It'll affect one or two people at most, and there'll be other people to replace what they're doing," said director

of furniture retailer V.Hive, Mr Michael Song.

He said the company — which employs about 80 staff — has been pro-active in asking employees who look to be under the weather to rest at home.

Retailer Metro said it is "quite ready" to deal with the situation if more frontline staff go on medical leave.

"We have the option to take on part-timers, or to extend the other staff's work hours," said Mr Edward Tan, its director of Human Resources, Administration and Operations. The average length of sick leave taken by the retailer's staff is two to three days.

The Health Ministry advised doctors in a July 1 circular to give seven days' medical leave to adult patients suspected to have H1N1, and 10 days' MC to children below 13 years old.

General practitioner David Hau gives longer MCs of between five to seven days to patients who fall in the high-risk groups, and those with more severe symptoms such as high fever. Although the Pioneer Mall branch of Alliance Healthcare that he practises at is a Pandemic Preparedness Clinic, Dr Hau said he doesn't take swabs of patients as Singapore is easing into the mitigation phase of H1N1.

But GP Leslie Tay of Karri Family Clinic (not a PPC), said

he usually dishes out two-day MCs, and reviews patients who don't recover by then.

"I think that's a better practice," said Dr Tay.

With longer MCs, could employers ask staff to work from home once they feel better?

Employers "shouldn't insist", said Mr Josh Goh, senior corporate services manager of recruitment firm The GMP Group. "But if it is home quarantine when employees are obviously well, then employers would probably ask staff to work from home."

Employees too should not "exploit" the more generous sick leave and should "understand the need of employers for someone to be present to do the work," said executive director of the Singapore Human Resources Institute David Ang.

Employees seem ready to hold up their end of the bargain.

"My mind can still function," said a 36-year-old executive at a financial institution, who attended teleconferences yesterday while on MC.

When asked if she worked from home while on three days' medical leave last week, public relations consultant Sylvia Lim, 27, said: "Yes, definitely. Except when the drowsy medication really knocked me out ... I was the main person in charge of an event that took place (on Wednesday)."

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A mother's sorrow ...

IT HAS been a trying time for the family of 13-year-old Ian Fong who died on Wednesday due to complications from the H1N1 flu virus.

What started out as a mild cough and fever escalated into fits, and Ian went into a coma he never woke up from.

Ian had been suffering from epilepsy for more than a decade and was admitted into the National University Hospital's intensive care unit last Sunday. He also suffered from attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, said Ms Kathleen Chia, his mother.

The authorities said he died from prolonged seizures with the H1N1 infection as a contributing factor.

"We are thankful that he



held on for three days, for us to ... accept the condition ... that we might lose him. As parents we hoped for the best but prepared for the worst," said Ms Chia.

Epileptics are usually not considered as being in the high risk group when it comes to flu viruses like H1N1, but doctors said some may have to remain vigilant.

Ian will be cremated at the Mandai Crematorium tomorrow. Ms Chia's birthday falls on the day as well. It will be a day she will never forget, she said.

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