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## Call to remove mental health query on job forms



Ms Porsche Poh, executive director of mental health advocacy organisation Silver Ribbon wants employers to stop asking potential workers if they have a history of mental illness in their job application forms. PHOTO: ST FILE



# Call to remove mental health query on job forms

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Advocacy group urges firms to eliminate or reword declaration; seeks help from Tafep

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Mental wellness advocacy group Silver Ribbon wants employers to stop asking potential workers if they have a history of mental illness in their job application forms.

Last month, it met the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (Tafep) to see if the alliance can urge employers to remove or reword that declaration on employment forms.

Even if not specifically required, employers - such as the largest one in Singapore, the Public Service - may ask applicants to declare existing medical conditions, "including mental illness".

"The declaration question or clause has always been a dilemma," said Ms Porsche Poh, Silver Ribbon executive director.

"If applicants declare a record of illness, they risk not getting the job even though they may be fully capable. If they don't declare it, they have to lie and live in fear of being judged later if they have a relapse. So, many dare not apply for a job."

Ms Poh advocates making the declaration voluntary at least.

More than one in 10 people here will have a mental illness in their lifetime, according to the 2010 Singapore Mental Health Study.

The most common is major depressive disorder, which affected more than 5 per cent of adults in the survey, or more than 57,000 men and twice as many adult women. Next most common was alcohol abuse and obsessive compulsive disorder, which affected one in 32 and one in 33 people respectively.

In return for employers dropping the clause, the charity will provide support to human resource departments in managing staff with mental health issues, and conduct lunchtime talks to promote mental wellness in the workplace.

It is still waiting on Tafep, which is made up of employer representatives, union leaders and government officials, for a response.

While not addressing the question directly, a Tafep spokesman told The Straits Times: "Job application forms should only ask for information that is relevant to assessing an applicant's suitability for the job, such as their skills and relevant experience. Tafep encourages any person who encounters employment discrimination to approach Tafep for advice and assistance."

Asking a prospective employee for information regarding his health or disabilities is not allowed in countries such as Britain and the United States.

In Singapore, there is no requirement to declare one's mental history under the Employment Act as there are no provisions relating to job application forms, the Ministry of Manpower told Silver Ribbon.

But while the Public Service amended its job application forms in 2006 to ask applicants to declare if they had criminal records, instead of whether they had ever been convicted in court - so that those whose records have been rendered as "spent" do not need to declare a previous conviction - it still requires applicants to declare any existing medical condition, including mental illness.

Said Mr Lim Teck Kiat, director of human resource policy at the Public Service Division: "Declaration... does not automatically disqualify a candidate from being considered for a position in the Public Service.

"In fact, with this information, the hiring agency will be in a better position to discuss the candidate's existing condition during the interview to ascertain his suitability for the job."

The Singapore National Employers Federation said most firms ask applicants to declare existing medical conditions, without specific reference to mental illness, usually for purposes of medical insurance.

But most insurance products do not cover mental illness, said Silver Ribbon, so the information is unnecessary.

Ms Li Zhong Ying, vocational specialist at the Job Club of the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), said: "Many companies' job application forms have a question on this (mental illness), and it can often be a challenge to our clients."

When the IMH and the Singapore Association of Mental Health (SAMH) place their clients in jobs with employers in their database, the firms would already know that the workers have had psychiatric treatment or have a mental illness.

Those who are still struggling with mental illness have their own challenges, which could make it hard to stay in a job for long.

IMH's Job Club, for instance, made about 270 job placements each year over the past three years. In its 2013 and 2014 financial years, only 64 per cent stayed in their jobs for at least two months. The SAMH places about 150 to 200 clients in jobs each year.

But for many, it is an uphill struggle to convince employers that they can work.

Ms Joyce Ling, 38, who runs a recruitment agency and a landscaping social enterprise providing jobs for people with mental conditions, said employers tell her that they do not think her workers can do the job well. One condominium manager even said he would fear for the safety of the residents.

"Any change to job forms would be more symbolic than impactful because many of those with mental illness are already not declaring now in order to be hired," said Ms Ling.