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Important to manage mental conditions properly

CAREFUL thought needs to be given to Dr Andy Ho's call for those with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders to be exempted from national service ("Exempt these young men from NS"; April 13).

If his suggestion is taken up, those diagnosed with psychotic illnesses would face the prospect of being exempted from NS. This is yet another label added onto them as they enter adulthood.

What about career soldiers who develop psychiatric disorders? Do they get discharged from their jobs instead of being treated? How about a full-time national serviceman clerk who suffers from schizophrenia but whose condition is stable after treatment? Do we discharge him just because of his illness?

Dr Ho described a person with schizophrenia as someone who is unstable and disconnected from reality. He is withdrawn, dishevelled and unable to take care of himself, or is bizarre and violent.

This is not the case with many patients. There are effective treatments, such as medication and psychosocial rehabilitation, for persons with schizophrenia.

There are a large number of young men with psychiatric illnesses who have completed NS without any issues. I have seen parents who were grateful for the opportunities and treatments that their sons received while undergoing NS.

What is important is proper identification and management of the conditions.

Apart from medical reviews, a serviceman who faces medical or psychological problems at any time during NS is subjected to specialist medical boards.

If his condition has affected him to the extent that he should not continue with NS in any capacity, then the Singapore Armed Forces should consider discharging him from service so he can concentrate on his recovery. This extends not just to schizophrenia but to all psychiatric and medical conditions as well.

Servicemen with mental illnesses should be handled as individuals, rather than be given a blanket discharge based purely on their conditions. That in itself is stigmatising.

Jared Ng (Dr)

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