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Title : New SingHealth handbook offers tips on medical relief**By** : Alicia Wong, TODAY**Date** : 13 Jul 2009 0704 hrs (GMT + 8hrs)

SINGAPORE: Barely three days into their 12-day trip, the medical relief mission team had to tend to one of their own. A member of the 10-person team from Singapore was found unconscious in his hotel room. He had developed a fever earlier in the day and returned to his room to rest.

He had gone into a coma, recalled Andrew Wee, who was part of the team to Orissa, India in August 2001. His team mates rushed him to hospital and, as soon as his condition had stabilised, air-evacuated him to a hospital in Singapore. He made a full recovery, but at that time, the team's morale hit "rock bottom", said Dr Wee, the deputy director of Marine Parade Polyclinic.

In sharp contrast to the "triumphant" mood before the incident, the team members were then close to packing up and returning to Singapore.

"We felt really guilty that a member got sick ... There was a lot of selfblame," Dr Wee said, even as he emphasised that such circumstances are "rare" and "most medical relief teams make it back without much fanfare".

The team stayed to carry on the mission and visited five villages.

Co-organised by the Singapore International Foundation, SingHealth and the National Healthcare Group, the trip was Dr Wee's first. And it taught him one important lesson: Be prepared.

So when SingHealth Polyclinics decided to publish its Medical Relief Mission Handbook, Dr Wee authored two chapters on pre and post-trip preparation. Other than reminders to take the necessary precautions such as having vaccinations, he also touched on psychological preparation.

At one point during that trip, everyone was getting really stressed, said Dr Wee, 39. "Everybody was shouting at each other, snapping and blaming one another. When you recognise the problem you can seek help so you don't go beyond the breaking point. And if you do, you can seek treatment or leave the mission," he said.

But sometimes, a person may not even be aware that there is a problem. "Psychological stress can fall well into your blind spot," cautioned Dr Wee. Awareness becomes all the more important as team members can then watch out for one another.

While the medical relief handbook — launched this month — targets those who have some medical training, it can help the layman as well.

Pre and post-preparation can help anyone, said Dr Wee. "Nobody can be fully prepared, especially first-timers. Each trip is different... that's why psychological preparation is so important, so you can bounce back."

Some people expect a hero's welcome when they return, but angry colleagues and the cold shoulder from their children might be what greet them instead. They need to understand that children need more time to "warm up" to a parent who has been away, or colleagues may be extra stressed because they had to take on the relief worker's workload when he or she was away, he said.

The pocket-sized handbook — the combined effort of SingHealth Polyclinic doctors — also provides information on common problems in disaster relief work, such as injuries and infectious diseases. It retails at S\$9.90. To obtain a copy, contact SingHealth Academy at 6321-4862.

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