

SUSPICIOUS MINDS

Movie clichés of people wearing tinfoil hats to prevent mind-control or consumed by the belief that someone is out to get them may be more than just the stuff of Hollywood. In fact, such paranoid behaviour or delusions may point to a serious psychiatric problem.

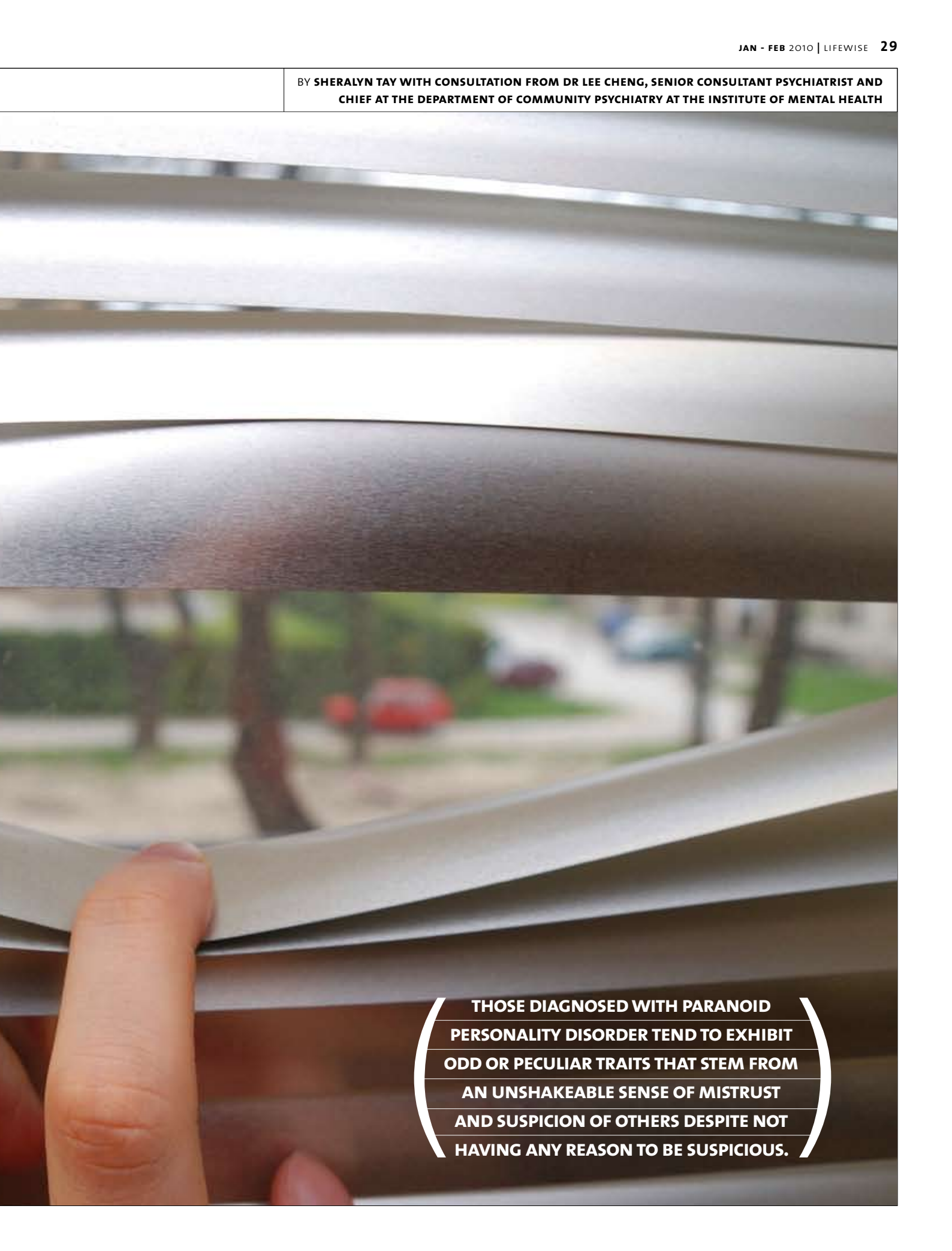
There was a plot against him. Mr Q just knew it. His co-workers all hated him because he was older than them and because he was Hainanese (and they had it in for the Hainanese). His co-workers were even following him around and were constantly gossiping about him. Overcome by the dread of the situation, Mr Q quit his job.

Renowned Austrian-American mathematician Kurt Gödel was convinced someone was out to poison him and would not eat unless his wife first tasted his food. When she was hospitalised for six months, he starved himself to death.

Such instances of unfounded dread and fear, so profound that they cause severe anxiety and strange behaviours, are some of the signs of a psychiatric disorder known as paranoia. According to Dr Lee Cheng, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist and Chief at the Department of Community Psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health, the term is used medically to describe a symptom within a psychiatric disorder or to describe the personality of a patient. "As a symptom in a psychiatric disorder, paranoia is defined as a delusional belief which is firmly held but untrue and contrary to a person's educational and cultural background," he told Lifewise. ❖



BY SHERALYN TAY WITH CONSULTATION FROM DR LEE CHENG, SENIOR CONSULTANT PSYCHIATRIST AND CHIEF AT THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY PSYCHIATRY AT THE INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH



THOSE DIAGNOSED WITH PARANOID PERSONALITY DISORDER TEND TO EXHIBIT ODD OR PECULIAR TRAITS THAT STEM FROM AN UNSHAKEABLE SENSE OF MISTRUST AND SUSPICION OF OTHERS DESPITE NOT HAVING ANY REASON TO BE SUSPICIOUS.

RULED BY MISTRUST

While anyone can experience mild feelings of paranoia as a result of things going wrong in their life, extreme paranoia is usually seen in people with severe mental health problems. “The most defining trait of paranoia is that of being persecuted or conspired against,” Dr Lee explained. Patients are always on guard, and have unfounded beliefs that others are constantly trying to harm or demean them. Research indicates that the disorder appears to be more common in men than in women and generally starts in early adulthood, but can also be triggered by physical or emotional trauma or linked to biological and psychological factors.

Someone described to have a paranoid personality does not have delusions but only have dominant ideas, he explained. These ideas are often associated with self-importance and combativeness, making sufferers unduly sensitive to real or imaginary humiliations and they rarely seek treatment. According to Dr Lee, paranoid behaviour can also be a symptom

of other major psychiatric disorders. “Paranoia is commonly found in cases of schizophrenia, delusional disorders or mood disorders,” he elaborated. In these other disorders, there are often other prominent accompanying psychiatric symptoms. In those suffering from schizophrenia, auditory hallucinations or ‘hearing voices’ is common and those with mood disorders have significant mood dysregulation or mood swings. Paranoia can also occur in other psychiatric disorders such as pathological (or morbid) jealousy, Dr Lee added. “This is where there is an abnormal belief that the marital partner is being unfaithful but is based on unsound evidence and reasoning,” he explained.

The distinction between people with paranoid personalities and those with paranoid symptoms within psychiatric disorders can be very difficult to make, Dr Lee said. However, when patients with paranoia present with dangerous behaviour, such as the intent to harm their perceived persecutors or themselves, intervention and treatment is needed.

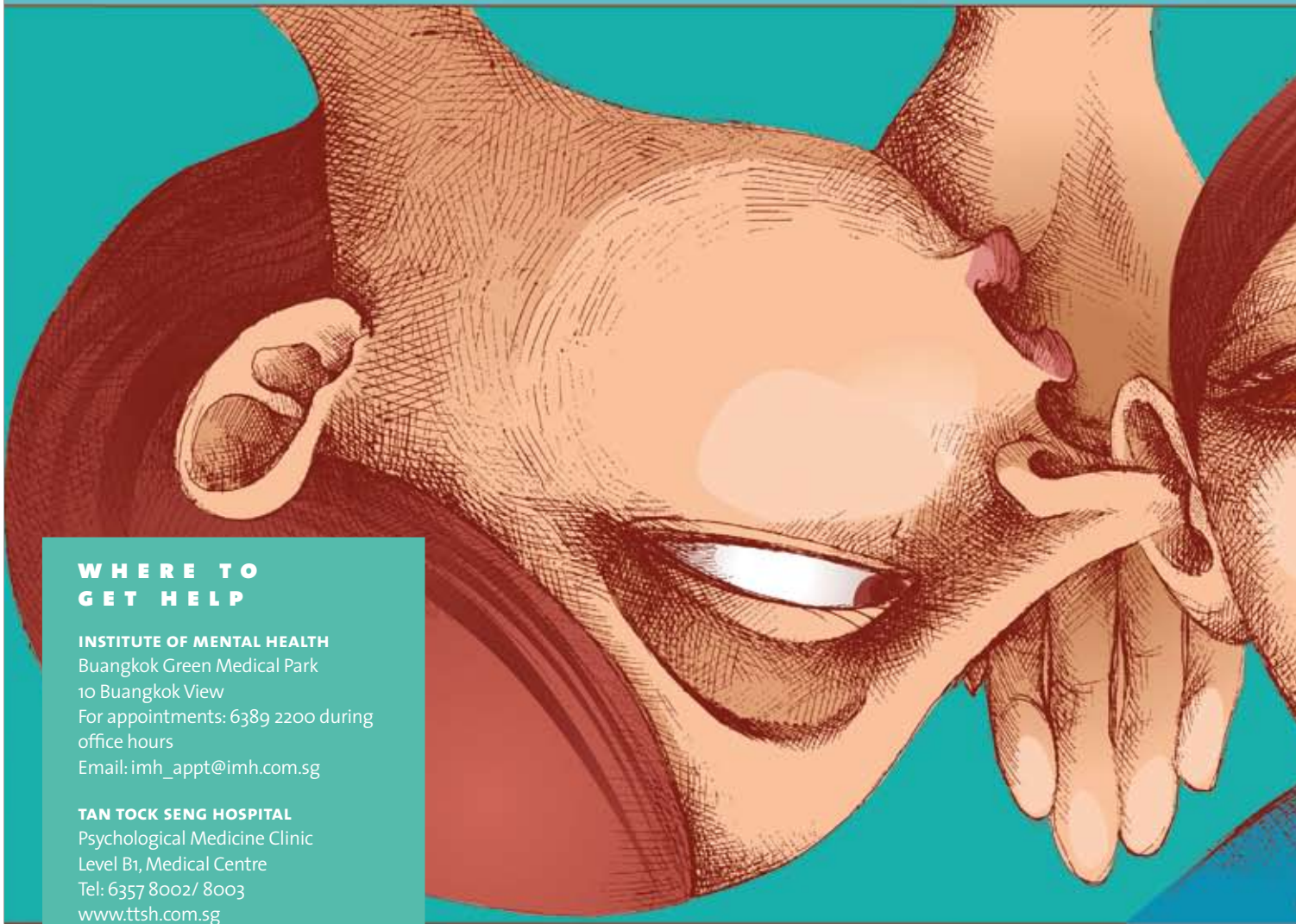
WHERE TO GET HELP

INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Buangkok Green Medical Park
10 Buangkok View
For appointments: 6389 2200 during office hours
Email: imh_appt@imh.com.sg

TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

Psychological Medicine Clinic
Level B1, Medical Centre
Tel: 6357 8002/ 8003
www.ttsh.com.sg



TAMING THE FEAR

Treatment for paranoia has many challenges which affect the long-term outcome for this disorder. However, advances in anti-psychotic medication have meant greater success in treating symptoms of paranoia with fewer side effects.

Dr Lee also explained that treatment requires a two-prong approach that involves anti-psychotic medications and psychosocial support. "It is important to establish a good rapport with the patient as patients with paranoia, they either do not believe that they are mentally unwell or may believe that the medications are out to harm them, especially if they develop side effects from the medications." This is an added challenge for mental health workers and means a holistic form of support is required to build a relationship of trust – not an easy feat, given the condition. "The treating psychiatrist should listen and show interest in the patient's beliefs but at the same time, does not condemn or collude in them," Dr Lee elaborated. Ultimately, it takes faith and hope as well as medications in order to quell the fears that rule and disrupt the lives of sufferers of paranoia. +



SIGNS OF PARANOIA

Those diagnosed with paranoid personality disorder tend to exhibit odd or peculiar traits that stem from an unshakeable sense of mistrust and suspicion of others despite not having any reason to be suspicious. Paranoid symptoms include:

- ▶ The pervasive belief others are using or deceiving them
- ▶ The perception that innocent remarks or casual looks are slights on their character and contain hidden messages
- ▶ Anger management issues
- ▶ Hostility, stubbornness or argumentative behaviour
- ▶ Strong and unfounded suspicions that their spouses or partners are being unfaithful
- ▶ A tendency to be controlling and jealous in relationships
- ▶ An inability to see their role in problems or conflicts
- ▶ Difficulty relaxing
- ▶ A constant doubt of the commitment, loyalty, or trustworthiness of others
- ▶ A reluctance to confide in others or reveal personal information
- ▶ The tendency to be unforgiving and hold grudges
- ▶ Hypersensitivity to criticism

