

Those who are suicidal 'need help, not punishment'

Decriminalising attempted suicide will help troubled individuals focus on getting help to address the root causes of their problems, said experts who welcomed a call to repeal the law.

"By decriminalising suicide, the Government is sending a strong message that those in distress situations should not be marginalised further, and are deserving of support and treatment," said Ms Corinna Lim, executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

"Criminalisation carries the threat of investigation, arrest, charge or punishment."

Instead of deterring people from attempting suicide, criminalisation deters them from seeking treatment, which increases the risk of suicide rather than reduce it, she added.

In a report presented to the Government, a committee reviewing the Penal Code said treatment, rather than prosecution, is the appropriate response to people who are so distressed that they are driven to take their own lives.

Ms Lim hopes the repeal goes hand in hand with addressing the underlying risk factors that increase a person's vulnerability to suicidal behaviour.

These factors include "difficulties in accessing mental health services, discrimination, a sense of isolation, abuse, violence and conflictual relationships".

"We should provide support to those who attempt suicide. This can be done, for instance, by providing psychological first-aid training to a specialist team of first respon-

ders in such emergency situations," Ms Lim added.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "I have always seen it as strange to treat suicide as a crime.

"I don't think the repeal will contribute to a rise in suicides or attempted suicides. But I hope it will convey the message that people with suicidal thoughts... need urgent help, rather than be judged."

Some experts believe those with suicidal thoughts are not deterred by the prospect of prosecution.

"Those contemplating suicide will not care about the consequences," said criminal lawyer Sunil Sudheesan.

Veteran lawyer Amolat Singh shared the same view. "When a person is on the verge of suicide, he is already in a different world. He has been pushed to the edge where he is even prepared to end his life. The fear of prosecution may in itself make him all the more determined to end his life successfully," he said.

"Those attempting suicide are clearly victims of circumstances. They need treatment and help more than having the book thrown at them."

Singapore Management University sociologist Paulin Straughan said decriminalising suicide is a big step towards recognising the importance of destigmatising mental illness.

"Attempted suicides are a cry for help and we must embrace a whole-of-society approach to help those afflicted to lead normal, productive lives," she added.

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