

A Collaboration with Primary Care

Lan Zhongzheng¹, Chua Yu Cong Eugene², Lin Yijun Carol, Rafika Ramli
Debbie Ng Yanling, Josephine Goh Min Lee, Liew Yao Sin, Tan Hui Nah
Bay Qin Yao, Wan Jinhui, Soon Shok Wen Winnie

¹Child Guidance Clinic, Institute of Mental Health
²National HealthCare Group Polyclinic
Singapore



Introduction

There is a high prevalence of internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, sadness, and loneliness among young people in Singapore, with about one in three reporting such symptoms in a 2022 national study.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increasing number of youths seeking mental health help at various youth-targeted platforms. However, there are limited specialized public mental health services for youths under 18, such as the Child Guidance Clinic (CGC) provided by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), leading to long waiting times.

As a result, it is essential to have alternative options for mental health care that are readily accessible and appropriate for youths. We propose that polyclinics (which are public primary care clinics in Singapore) could serve as an alternative option for mental health care for youths, as they are located across the country. Primary care workers often encounter patients with mental health symptoms such as anxiety or poor sleep. However, these workers may not feel confident or well-equipped to assess and manage mental health conditions, especially among youths.

The Plan

Adolescent Evaluation and Rapid Treatment (ALERT) is an initiative incepted by the National Healthcare Polyclinic (NHGP) in 2021 and CGC actively partners along side since beginning of 2022. It desires to enhance the robustness of mental health care for youths age 13 to 17 in the polyclinic setting.

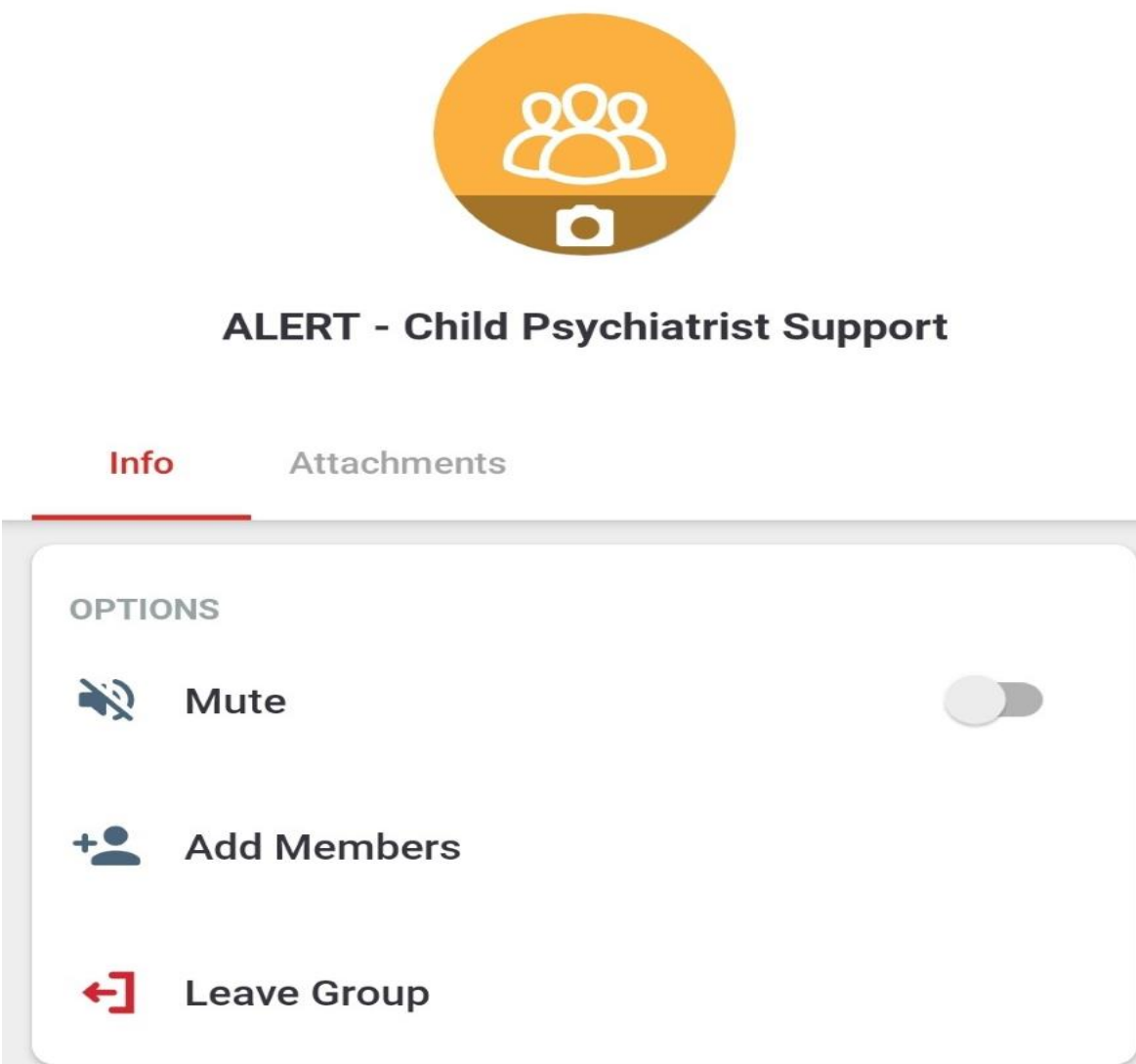
ALERT hopes to achieve the following aims:

- 1. Encourage opportunistic screening of at-risk youths by family physicians (primary care doctors).
- 2. Provide a framework for referral of troubled youths.
- 3. Enhancing Medical Social Worker (MSW) to provide comprehensive youth case management support.
- 4. Increasing mental health awareness among youth

Mental health leads were identified in each polyclinic and selected medical social workers underwent upskilling to improve their mental health knowledge and skills through a national training programme Supporting Youth in Community (SYINC).

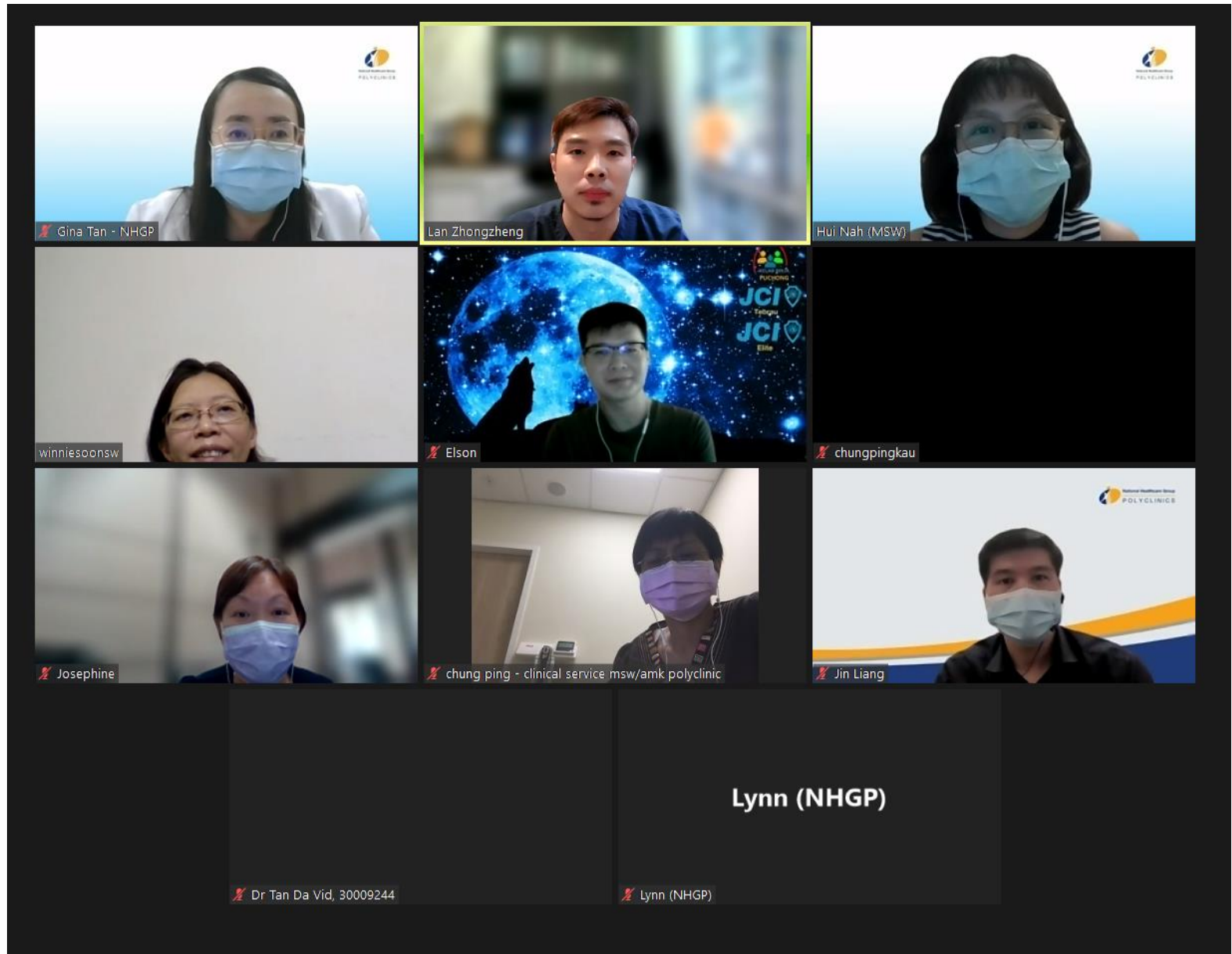
Further progress

After finalizing the workflow of ALERT, we further established ways to better support primary care providers in the implementation of ALERT. Some of the initiatives taken so far:



- A work discussion group was created in Oct 2022 using the communication platform Tiger Connect. This allows timely discussion of urgent cases and sharing of relevant youth related mental health resources. We currently have 19 members in this group.

- Monthly case discussion meetings started in Jan 2023. This allows ALERT team members to raise non-urgent clinical issues in the youths they see for learning purposes and improvement of patient care.



- Mental health trainings will start on a quarterly basis. We identified mental health professionals within CGC who are keen to contribute their domains of expertise. They will help to further enhance the capability of ALERT team members.

The Outcome

Following the pilot of ALERT in 6 polyclinics between Nov 2021 till Dec 2022, a total of 30 youths have been seen, with a median age of 16 years old. Most common reason presented for doctor's consult was due to parental concerns (54%), followed by self-referral (40%), social partners (3%) and somatic issue (3%). 27 youths (91%) have got some kind of emotional or behavioural problems, of which 19 (64%) continue to follow up with the polyclinic for support. The remaining are either referred to other community agencies or to specialist psychiatric services for more appropriate care.

Some initial challenges encountered thus far: much time needed to build rapport with youths, youths or parents declining community or school support services, lack of training and experience in some primary care providers (especially those who have not attended SYINC) and etc.

Conclusion

ALERT is a collaboration between NHGP and CGC to improve the competence and confidence of primary care providers in providing mental health support to youths. This would hopefully improve the accessibility of mental health care to youths and reduce stigma in seeking help. In addition, this builds upon the stepped care model of mental health support, such that more severe cases can be managed in secondary and tertiary mental health settings.

References

Ang, Q. (2022, May 20). About 1 in 3 young people in Singapore has mental health symptoms: Study. *The Straits Times*.

