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MPs Speaking:	[The Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information (Dr Janil Puthucheary), Assoc Prof Walter Theseira, Ms Anthea Ong (Nominated Member), Assoc Prof Walter Theseira (Nominated Member), Dr Janil Puthucheary, Dr Janil Puthucheary]

DISCLOSURE OF PERSONAL DATA WHEN GOVERNMENT ADDRESSES PUBLIC COMPLAINTS

11 Assoc Prof Walter Theseira asked the Prime Minister when individuals publicise complaints or petitions to Government agencies which may contain inaccuracies (a) what are the considerations behind whether Government agencies may publicly disclose identifying information and personal details of these individuals; (b) what safeguards exist to ensure that only the minimum personal information is disclosed to establish the facts of the case; and (c) what can be done to ensure that individuals with genuine grievances or unmet needs are not deterred from seeking help publicly

The Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Transport (Dr Janil Puthucheary) (for the Prime Minister): Mr Speaker, Government agencies sometimes need to disclose personal data in the public interest, to counter inaccuracies about the Government's processes or policies contained in publicised complaints or petitions, in particular, where it is the complainant who has called public attention to the case. Government agencies have to do so to correct inaccuracies and provide an accurate picture of what occurred so as to maintain public trust and to serve all citizens effectively. Otherwise, if citizens are misled about the Government's processes or policies, they may become unnecessarily anxious or may make decisions that are detrimental to themselves based on the incorrect information, for example deciding not to seek medical treatment.

Such disclosure of personal data by Government agencies is limited in scope. First, personal data is disclosed only if the agency's clarifications would be disputable or insufficiently clear, without the disclosure of such personal data. Secondly, the personal data to be disclosed is specific enough to provide a full picture of the issue, to enable the relevant individual to challenge the Government's account

of the case, based on the facts provided, if need be. Third, care is taken not to disclose personal data that is irrelevant to the case. These considerations serve to safeguard personal data from unnecessary public disclosure.

However, on occasion it will be necessary to disclose the identity of the person involved in the case, even when the publicised complaint itself has been anonymised. This is to remove any ambiguity in the Government's statement of the facts and settle any doubts over the matter conclusively in the minds of the public.

The Government is committed to putting citizens at the heart of all we do. Citizens have many channels to request for help from the Government and to give feedback. These include physical touchpoints such as service centres, and online channels such as the OneService app and emails of Quality Service Managers. The Government treats all feedback seriously, whether that feedback is conveyed publicly or via one of these channels. We will take the necessary action to address the issue and close the loop with the member of the public.

Assoc Prof Walter Theseira (Nominated Member): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Senior Minister of State for the reply. Just one supplementary question. I am quite concerned we will discourage persons who are trying to get help because these cases can be publicised for reasons beyond the complainant's control. Someone may put up a private Facebook post and finds that it gets shared, and they do not know why it got shared. Will the Government consider a protocol where agencies first try to get the person concerned to agree to a statement put out by the agency that clarifies matters? And only if that does not happen, then as a last resort, the agency could clarify matters without that person's consent.

Dr Janil Puthucheary: Mr Speaker, I thank the Member for his question. The issue at hand is, of course, that these types of public declarations, whether anonymised or not, are going to be unusual in nature. There is something about the case or the complainant or the interaction, which does not quite fall into Standard Operating Procedure, nor lend itself to a protocol; otherwise, we would not be in this situation.

The second thing is that, as a result of this, it would be inappropriate for us to constrain the agencies' response to an inaccurate or outright false public statement. Thirdly, in a way, which as the Member had pointed out, may open itself to manipulation and further downstream ambiguity, disinformation, whether inadvertently or deliberately.

So, I think I have articulated in my answer the principles under which public sector agencies are expected to operate; the principles which citizens can expect of Government in dealing with this matter. The bottom line is that should a complaint of this nature occur in public, associated with disinformation and which impacts the way in which Government processes Government policies that serve citizens are being misrepresented, we should expect agencies to reply in public and disclose information so that we can set the record straight; and make sure that Singapore and Singaporeans are well informed.

Ms Anthea Ong (Nominated Member): Can I ask the Senior Minister of State if the Government has channels and measures for citizens who want to seek redress against Government for what they deem as unfair public disclosure since the Government is not bound by the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA).

Dr Janil Puthucheary: Certainly, there are many numbers of channels and feedback routes, which I have described in my previous answer. Citizens can approach their Member of Parliament, they can approach anybody and they can use any of these means, including a public discourse, should they wish to pursue the matter. PDPA notwithstanding and my answer notwithstanding, none of this prevents or is meant to discourage a citizen from seeking redress from a complaint. It is merely that, should a complaint occur in the public space and as a result of that complaint, the public has been misinformed, inaccuracies have been stated, then those inaccuracies need to be stated in the public in a way that is unambiguous and the facts robustly explained to everybody.
