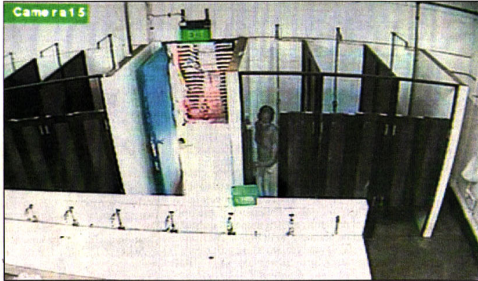


Cameras in dorm toilet spark outcry



A Lockson Hydraulics spokesman says the cameras installed on the ceiling above the toilet cubicles (left) have only a view of the shower heads and wash basins (above). ST PHOTO: MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN

PLAINLY WRONG

"This is very wrong morally. Would we put cameras in public toilets to stop people from wasting water? It is an affront to human dignity."

Ms Bridget Tan, welfare group Home's president

Move to curb water wastage an invasion of privacy, say workers, welfare advocates

By TEH JOO LIN & LUKE VIJAY

IT IS common for foreign worker dormitory operators to install closed-circuit television cameras at the entrances to their buildings and in other common areas, to monitor any shenanigans involving the residents.

But one operator in Jurong West has gone a step further and installed two cameras on the ceiling of the common toilet, which houses shower and toilet stalls, urinals, and a row of wash basins.

Lockson Hydraulics, which runs the dormitory and is also a scaffolding company, said the cameras — part of a network of 24 electronic eyes on the premises — were put up to deter water wastage after its water bills soared and repeated calls to its residents to save water went unheeded.

But the presence of the cameras has raised the ire of some workers and welfare groups, who complain that the invasion of workers' privacy has gone too far.

A 37-year-old Indian national, who recently moved out of the dormitory to stay elsewhere, said: "We cannot accept this. It's the toilet, how can you put cameras? We're all men living together, but this is ridiculous."

A spokesman for Lockson, a 35-year-old company, whose director is Mr Kang Yee Yin, 38, said the cameras were installed a few months ago, after which the monthly water bill dropped by about 20 per cent, although he did not give exact figures.

He added that these two cameras view only the shower heads and the wash basins in the toilet.

"They are able to see only the top of the showers, where the water comes out from the sprinklers. At the most, you can see only part of the workers' backs. They are not there to capture the men bathing," he said.

The Straits Times was shown the camera feed as proof.

The spokesman claimed that the cameras, which cannot be rotated, have been effective in reducing the use of water: "Before this, we put up notices not to waste water, but they were ignored."

Although the water is dispensed through pressure taps to reduce wastage, workers got around this by using wires to keep the water running.

He said: "It's safe to say that for workers' dormitories, they (workers) don't save water for you."

About 100 workers, some of whom are Lockson employees, stay in the dormitory and all of them use that toilet.

Foreign worker welfare advocates blasted the rationale behind installing the toilet cameras.

Ms Bridget Tan, president of the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home), said: "This is very wrong morally. Would we put cameras in public toilets to stop people from wasting water? It's an affront to human dignity."

MP Halimah Yacob, who often speaks up on foreign worker issues, said: "Cameras there are an invasion of privacy. It doesn't matter where they are pointing, they shouldn't be there in the first place."

Agreeing, a Transient Workers Count Too (TW2) spokesman said: "Even if the cameras do not show the workers showering or using the toilet, the men may believe they're being observed and feel embarrassed or harassed. There are other ways to ensure water isn't wasted. One expects to be assured of privacy in the toilet and shower stall."

The move by Lockson also drew surprise from other dormitory managers, who said this was the first time they had heard of such a practice.

One said it was "common sense" that such a move was unacceptable. He said: "It's just like in a department store... Can you put cameras inside the changing room? Of course not."

Cameras are installed inside dormitories for "everyone's security", said Mr Simon Lee, executive director of the Singapore Contractors Association.

He said there was no regulation regarding cameras in dorms, though operators are usually asked to install them on perimeter fencing and in communal areas such as dining halls.

Despite the moral outcry, no law appears to have been flouted.

Noting the lack of a general privacy law in Singapore, lawyer Bryan Tan of Keystone Law Corporation said building owners have the right to put up cameras on their premises — even in toilets.

The move does not run afoul of laws against peeping Toms as the dormitory toilet is only for men, pointed out lawyer Amolal Singh.

"In our Penal Code, only the woman is said to have modesty," he said, noting that common showers in military camps and swimming pools had no partitions in the past.

"That said, I think the rationale for putting in the cameras is questionable."

joolin@sph.com.sg
vijay@sph.com.sg