



Mr Harbhajan Singh, who turns 78 in October, is looking forward to receiving his 60-year long service award next year. His long career has seen him working in different hospital wards as well as the Communicable Disease Centre, where he was at the forefront of Singapore's battle against Sars. ST PHOTO: LEE JIA WEN



Above: Mr Singh with fellow nurses meeting then Health Minister Toh Chin Chye in 1977.



Left: Mr Singh receiving a nursing certificate from Mrs Benjamin Sheares, wife of the then President, in the 1970s. PHOTOS: ST FILE, COURTESY OF MR HARBHAJAN SINGH

The Lives They Live

# Veteran nurse has no plans to retire

While the pioneer leaders were the original architects of Singapore, everyday heroes helped build society here. This is another story about such people in the series The Lives They Live.

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Senior Correspondent

Mr Harbhajan Singh works in a hospital and some patients have mistaken him for a security guard. "My father was a watchman, but I am a nurse," he said with a laugh. The 77-year-old started working as a nurse in the Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) accident and emergency department in 1962 after three years in its nursing school. In 1965, Mr Singh was posted to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) as a tuberculosis nurse. More than 50 years later, he still works in the hospital. He has worked for 42 years in its wards and is one of the longest-serving nurses at TTSH. In 2015, TTSH gave him the title of "Emeritus Fellow", an award normally given to doctors. He is the only nurse to have received the award from the hospital so far. But Mr Singh almost did not become a nurse. After passing his Senior Cambridge exams, the Gan Eng Seng School alumnus decided to apply to join the civil service, which held a re-

ruitment drive in 1959. "We had to write down our choices. My first choice was teaching, second choice was nursing, and third choice, laboratory assistant," he recalled. The interviewer told him he was more suited to be a nurse, he said. "Maybe the interviewer felt that I should be a nurse because I was already living near SGH," he said in jest. At that time, he was living with his father and mother, a housewife, as well as two brothers and a sister in a village near SGH. Mr Singh accepted the offer of a place in the nursing school. His parents were supportive of his move. "Nurses care for people. Nursing has a good image," he said. There were about 80 nursing students and 15 were male. "There were two male Sikhs," he said. "My monthly salary was \$152.50," he recalled. "The salary was decent for a school leaver." Nursing school was "very tough", he said. Subjects included nursing and medicine. The toughest subject was anatomy and physiology, where he had to memorise many terms. In his years at TTSH, he has worked in different wards. "What-

Passion for nursing

SCAN TO WATCH

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ever discipline you name in TTSH – surgical, medical – I have worked in them," he said. In 1975, Mr Singh, then aged 35, was promoted to nurse manager, to take charge of a ward, which is usually staffed by about 40 nurses. He said the work of nurses changed from the 1960s to 1990s. "We used to use glass thermometers with mercury to take temperatures. We needed to shake the thermometer after each use and they could break easily. Now, there are digital thermometers," he said. "Nurses also had to cut and wrap gauze and sent them for sterilisation in the past. Now, the gauze come sterilised in packages." The image of nurses has improved as their job scopes expanded, said Mr Singh. "The advance practice nurses today are trained to diagnose and man-

to the Institute of Mental Health. He worked there for two years before re-joining TTSH in 1994. A year later, he was promoted to senior nurse manager at the Communicable Disease Centre (CDC), which is part of TTSH. The CDC was then the national centre for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) patients and Mr Singh recalled treating them in the 1990s. "There was the stigma attached to HIV patients at that time," he recounted. "Some of them were weak and a few were demanding," he said. "They were our patients, so we cared for them as best as we could." To help the families of HIV patients, he organised a fund-raising walk in the CDC in 1998, raising \$200,000. In 2002, Mr Singh was 62 and due for retirement, but was rehired by the CDC. A year later, in March 2003, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) hit Singapore and the CDC became the main battlefield. Mr Singh recalled receiving a phone call from the Ministry of Health telling him to get the CDC ready to receive Sars patients. The CDC did not have many individual isolation rooms with built-in toilets, he said. "So we had to adapt and turn as many rooms into isolation rooms as we could." He took charge of a team of about 100 nurses at the CDC to care for the Sars patients. It was only about two weeks later that TTSH became the designated hospital for Sars and took some of the load off the CDC. "Those two weeks were the two toughest weeks of my life," Mr Singh said. The deaths of his colleagues – Dr Ong Hok Su, a medical officer, and nurse Hamidah Ismail – from Sars affected him too. "They died doing their jobs," he recounted. In total, five healthcare workers in Singapore – two doctors, two nurses and a healthcare attendant – died from Sars after coming into contact with patients. In August 2003, Mr Singh was among 239 people who received National Day awards for helping Singapore in its battle against Sars. He remained a senior nurse manager at the CDC until 2006, when he was transferred to TTSH to do administration work. His current duties involve meeting visitors and doing general administration work. Mr Singh, who has four grown-up children and four grandchildren, lives in a terraced house near Marymount Road with his wife. He turns 78 in October but does not plan to retire yet. "I am looking forward to next year, when I am due to receive my 60-year long service award," he said, adding: "If I can still contribute to the nursing profession and hospital, why should I stop doing so?"

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