

Coronavirus: Supporting the front line

Behind the fleet of front liners caring for Covid-19 patients is an army of supporters who are less visible, but equally important in the war against the pandemic. **The Straits Times** finds out how various departments in four hospitals have been assisting patients behind the scenes while battling their own challenges, from manpower shortages to export restrictions.

Tireless effort behind the scenes

Shabana Begum

On top of having to work more intensively during the Covid-19 period, environmental service associate Roslina Muhammad, 44, had an added emotional burden.

Since Malaysia's lockdown in March, the Malaysian, who works at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH), has been separated from her 22-year-old daughter back home.

She was among the many Malaysians who used to commute to Singapore daily for work.

"I was worried for my daughter because it was not very safe for her to live alone in Johor (Baru). During the first two to three weeks, she would cry when I video-called her. But she also had to understand I had to work," said Ms Roslina.

After staying in a hotel in March, she rented a room in a Housing Board flat in Yishun in April.

Similarly, her colleague, Mr Irme Mohd Zakwan, also a Malaysian, has been renting a flat in Yishun with a few friends, after staying in a hotel for two to three months.

The 32-year-old environmental service associate, who normally lives with his parents in Johor Baru, said: "My mum told me to stay in Singapore and continue working. She told me not to worry about her because she could take care of herself." Ms Roslina and Mr Irme are from KTPH's environmental services department, which is made up largely of foreign staff. The 100-plus employees are in charge of keeping the hospital clean and handling linen.



Their head of department, Madam Thangavalu Santha, 63, said almost all her Malaysian staff stayed in Singapore to work after their home country's lockdown.

"I am impressed that till today, they are still here, while their families are in Malaysia. They said they will return only after (the) Covid (situation) is settled here and in Malaysia."

Disinfecting the hospital has become more rigorous over the past seven months, with the staff having to don personal protective equipment (PPE) while working in high-risk areas.

Environmental service associate Indo Rani Marimuthu, 58, who works in the hospital's acute and emergency (A&E) care centre, said

she had to increase her stamina to meet the faster pace of work.

"Work was tiring. After cleaning each bed, we had to wash our hands and put on a fresh set of PPE. The biohazard bins were full after every five minutes, and when they call for patient transfer, we have to quickly finish our work and be on standby." When Covid-19 patients are trans-



Environmental service associates Irme Mohd Zakwan (from left), Roslina Muhammad and Indo Rani Marimuthu at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. Mr Irme and Ms Roslina, both Malaysians, stayed back here to continue working amid the pandemic, and have not returned home. PHOTOS: KHOO TECK PUAT HOSPITAL



ferred from the A&E to pandemic wards, Ms Indo has to follow the path and mop the floor to prevent the spread of infection.

"It was difficult to breathe with the N95 mask, and the tightness of the mask and goggles caused headaches. But I was focused on giving the best for the patients... good quality clean beds and toilets," she said.

Madam Santha's staff were also initially apprehensive about the risk of Covid-19 infection.

"I was most concerned about their safety. Even if they have to rush, I always stress that they must wear the PPE properly," said Madam Santha.

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Racing against time to secure essential drugs

In March, when countries started to implement lockdowns due to the surging pandemic, the procurement team at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's (TTSH) pharmacy scrambled to secure medicines before exports were disrupted.

Thus began their race against time to avoid medicine shortages and ensure sufficient Covid-19 drugs – not just for TTSH, but for other hospitals as well.

"Even as we placed orders with the vendors, there was no certainty that the drugs would come in, until they reached our doorstep," said Ms Chong Yi Mei, 35, senior pharmacist from healthcare logistics firm Alps who is based in TTSH's pharmacy procurement and supply chain unit.

During the peak of the pandemic, the team had to order four to five times more medicines for symptomatic treatment, such as cough syrup and lozenges, said Ms Chong.

The usage of hand rubs in the hospital also increased by 50 per cent.

TTSH and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases also procured drugs used in Covid-19 treatment for national use at the start of the pandemic.

When hospitals were ramping up intensive care unit (ICU) capacities in April, a neuromuscular blocking drug used during intubation was running low. The procurement team and the authorities consulted ICU clinicians to bring in an alternative drug in time.



Principal pharmacist Chong Yi San, 41, getting the medications for outpatients at TTSH's pharmacy. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

The team also had to ensure the hospitals did not run out of surgical-grade hand rub and handwash when the go-to vendor stopped exports. Diversifying the sources and maximising the vendor network were integral in preventing supply disruption, said Ms Chong.

Internally, handwash was prioritised for front liners, while others switched to ordinary soap.

Procurement pharmacists send medicines to patients, but they rarely see the outcomes.

Ms Chong's sister, Ms Chong Yi San, 41, who is a principal pharmacist at TTSH's outpatient pharmacy, said: "(Yi Mei) spent a lot of effort trying to procure Covid-19 medicines. When we read in the papers that an ICU patient recovered and was discharged, it was heartwarming."

Shabana Begum

Ensuring flow of supplies to hands that heal

Tucked away in a basement at the National University Hospital (NUH) is a warehouse that stores more than 2,600 types of medical supplies and gowns for healthcare staff and patients.

The less visible materials management department has been more busy over the past seven months, delivering trolley loads of supplies to clinics and wards daily, and managing supply chain shocks.

Thousands of pieces of personal protective equipment were used by the hospital each day during the peak of the pandemic, almost three times their normal usage rate, said Mr Kenny Tang, 46, head of the department.

While grappling with higher demand, the department had to deal with export limitations as its suppliers abroad had to save resources for the use of their own countries.

To avoid a hospital-wide shortage of supplies, the team had to diversify their sourcing and also reach out to non-traditional sources such as a local corporate gift vendor, which helped the department obtain face shields from China.

With supply uncertainty, price increases for crucial items such as disposable pillow covers, bandages, dressing and alcohol swabs were unavoidable, said Mr Tang.

Managing more order requests from wards and making daily trips to more than 30 locations in the



Storekeeper Nazarudi Mohd Abi wrapping supplies to prevent spillage during transportation. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

hospital became the norm for the department's storekeepers. Previously, they replenished supplies a few times a week.

Many of the 10 storekeepers are long-serving staff, and half of them are aged between 50 and 68. For each delivery, they had to lug heaps of heavy and bulky medical items on trolleys across the Kent Ridge grounds. "Leveraging technology is our biggest challenge, and it is still a manual process," said Mr Tang.

But from this weekend, the storekeepers' workload will be reduced by 20 per cent as the department switches to an electronic system to alert the team when supply in wards are running low. Mr Tang added: "Although we tend to be invisible, I always tell my team the role we play is meaningful because we fill the hands that heal."

Shabana Begum

Converting facilities at short notice

Before Chinese New Year, Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) department of facilities management and engineering (FME) was activated to transform the hospital into an outbreak-ready zone.

Within two days, staff had to convert the ambulatory surgery centre into an extension of the emergency department to hold patients with coronavirus symptoms.

As the pandemic surged, they converted a multi-storey carpark into a fever screening area.

This heavy lifting was not unfamiliar because the department and its partners from facility service company ISS Singapore have been doing yearly drills and exercises to prepare for outbreaks since Sars in 2003.

"Our mobilisation process was more unique and structured compared with Sars because we were more prepared this time," said FME's director Tay Kim Say, 64.

But they did face unforeseen manpower and resource issues.

As 60 per cent of the department's contractors are migrant workers, they had to work with a smaller pool of people for a few weeks. This meant that the rest of the technicians and contractors had to work 12-hour shifts and on some weekends, said Mr Low Jee Keik, 58, ISS Singapore's senior key account manager. Previously, the contractors worked eight-hour shifts.

Due to Malaysia's lockdown, they



Technicians using tape as safe distancing markers in the pharmacy at Singapore General Hospital last Tuesday. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

were unable to import extra materials to build makeshift facilities. At one point, when the link bridge between SGH's Block 3 and Outram Community Hospital was converted into a patient holding area, there were insufficient partition panels to block off the area.

Desperate times called for creative solutions. The team recalled that a disused building at 226 Outram Road, which used to belong to the hospital and is now under the Singapore Land Authority, had some old furniture.

The FME team brought over some metal cabinets left outside the building and used them as makeshift partitions.

"This also helped to save cost, and the nurses and security guards could store their uniforms in the cabinets," said Mr Low.

Shabana Begum

New Covid-19 cluster in Kaki Bukit dormitory

Goh Yan Han

A new cluster in a dormitory in Kaki Bukit was announced by the Ministry of Health (MOH) yesterday.

One of the newly confirmed Covid-19 cases was linked to four previously confirmed cases to form a new cluster at Homestay Lodge at 39 Kaki Bukit Avenue 3.

It was among the 73 new cases linked to migrant workers staying in dormitories confirmed yesterday, out of a total of 87 new cases.

Two were also linked to the cluster at Sungei Tengah Lodge announced on Saturday, about a month after it had been closed as a cluster, bringing its total to 58 cases. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM), Building and

Construction Authority (BCA) and MOH said in a joint statement before midnight yesterday that all 58 cases were asymptomatic.

MOM has issued a stay-home notice to 4,800 workers in the dormitory as a precautionary measure and will test them in the next few days, while BCA has issued a safety time-out notice to 20 construction projects where the Covid-19-positive workers had gone to work.

MOH also confirmed yesterday that a 38-year-old Vietnamese male work pass holder was the sole community Covid-19 case. He is an unlinked case and was detected under MOH's enhanced community testing to test all individuals aged 13 and above who are diagnosed with acute respiratory infection.

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Epidemiological investigations of the case are in progress, MOH said, adding that all the identified close contacts of the case have been isolated and placed on quarantine.

The ministry will also conduct serological tests for his household contacts to determine if he could have been infected by them.

There were also 13 imported cases who had all been placed on stay-home notice upon arrival in Singapore. All were tested while serving their stay-home notice.

Five are permanent residents who returned to Singapore from India on Aug 11 and two are a dependant's pass holder and a long-term visit pass holder who arrived from India and the Philippines on Aug 11.

Two are work permit holders cur-

rently employed in Singapore who arrived from the Philippines on Aug 11.

Another two are student's pass holders who arrived from India on Aug 11, while the last two are short-term visit pass holders who were allowed entry into Singapore as one of them has been seeking medical treatment here and the other is the parent and caregiver. They arrived from Bangladesh on Aug 21.

The number of new daily cases in the community remained stable at an average of two cases per day in the past two weeks. The number of unlinked cases in the community has also remained stable at an average of one case per day in the past two weeks, said MOH.

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Update on cases

New cases: 87
Imported: 13 (5 permanent residents, 2 work permit holders, 1 dependant's pass holder, 1 long-term visit pass holder, 2 student's pass holders, 2 short-term visit pass holders)
In community: 1 (1 work pass holder)
In dormitories: 73

Active cases: 2,162
In hospitals: 76 (0 in ICU)
In community facilities: 2,086

Deaths: 27
Patients with Covid-19 who died from other causes: 15

Total discharged: 54,149
Discharged yesterday: 244

TOTAL CASES: 56,353