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## Living Well Volunteering at hospitals, care centres



Volunteers Johari Nazir and his wife Aisha Pwee greet and guide patients at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital. ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN

# Healthcare's helping hands

**From aiding patients in getting around hospitals to navigating the lived realities of illness, volunteers provide invaluable assistance**



**Akshita Nanda**  
Correspondent

Ms Saritha Viswanadhan, 39, volunteers at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's (TTSH) amputee support group, helping patients who are figuring out how to live life with a prosthetic limb or wheelchair.

Her left leg was amputated at the hip after a road accident when she was eight, and she knows how reassuring and affirming it is to hear from others in a similar position.

Like her, hundreds of people in Singapore donate their time to hospitals and care centres, perhaps providing peer support, engaging patients or helping them through various stages of their medical appointments.

Some, like Ms Saritha, have lived experience of the disease or medical condition. They can help with questions that doctors or therapists might be less well-placed to answer, such as how to deal with the rashes and blisters that come with wearing a prosthetic limb.

Other volunteers offer help with registration at hospitals or guide patients to where they need to be. Worry and illness can make it harder for patients and caregivers to manage such simple tasks, as volunteer Johari Nazir knows firsthand.

The 71-year-old former sales and



marketing manager has been a hospital volunteer since 2006. He first offered his time at Alexandra Hospital, then Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. He now greets and guides patients at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital (NTFGH).

He recalls that many years ago, when he took his late mother to a

hospital, he was worried about finding the clinic and also about leaving her alone in a wheelchair while he parked his car. A staff member calmed him down and took charge of his mother's wheelchair. "I was so impressed with the service and with the person who helped my mother," he said.

Later, he decided to volunteer and help others in turn.

He volunteers at least once a week, as does his wife Aisha Pwee, 69, a former secretary.

There are about 60 volunteers across NTFGH and Jurong Community Hospital (JCH). They may greet and guide patients or volun-

teer at the pharmacy to pack prescribed medicines before pharmacists verify and dispense them.

Some volunteers support the work of nurses by serving patients meals or feeding them.

Volunteers go through training before being deployed.

From 2020 to the first part of this year, people were unable to volunteer at hospitals because of pandemic restrictions. This was disappointing for senior volunteers like Mr Johari and retired accountant Angie Ng, 61, who used to volunteer for up to 22 hours a week at NTFGH and JCH.

"It was like my new job," says Ms Ng, who, like all volunteers, receives no payment for her services.

She greeted and guided patients, helped nurses watch over patients in the wards to prevent falls and contributed to patient engagement activities such as art and craft sessions or concerts.

"The hospital staff would tease me, saying: 'You come earlier than me and leave later,'" she says. "Why do I do this? I've a passion to serve and the joy it brings others keeps me going."

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# Volunteers provide a personal touch

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Now, she volunteers once a week, often helping Cantonese- or Mandarin-speaking patients communicate with doctors or their caregivers. "That's the most enjoyable job," she says.

She recalls translating for a mother and daughter pair who could not communicate well and were at odds over the mother's desire to cook and serve rich food at family meals when she was supposed to be on a lighter diet.

Ms Ng explained to the daughter that the mother cooked rich food so she could tempt her children to visit and eat. The mother broke down crying in relief after Ms Ng's explanation.

"I felt really happy that I could help them," says Ms Ng, who is married and has a grown-up daughter.

Volunteers support the work of trained healthcare professionals and add a personal touch that patients find invaluable.

TTSH has 340 volunteers across 36 volunteer programmes and patient support groups, including the amputee support group where Ms Saritha has volunteered since moving here in 2016 with her consultant husband and their daughter from Mumbai.

"A support group is an incomparable strength," she says. "While your caregivers, family and doctors have your best interests in mind, the support groups have many people who've experienced exactly what you have and can offer you the kind of solutions and support that others cannot."

The patients she speaks with are often still grappling with the implications of the amputation.

"Some are still in shock and anxious about what life is going to be like after this. I tell them: 'It is a lot to process. Be kind to yourself. It's going to be okay, we're all here to help.'"

She adds: "Disability is only part



of a person. It doesn't define the person. Every society should learn to normalise disability. It's just a state of being."

Apart from helping out at the amputee support group, the dependant's pass holder and Indian national also volunteered to pack medicines at the outpatient pharmacy in TTSH from March to May

this year, when the hospital asked for an extra pair of hands.

She says she is ready to help whenever the hospital asks, as she is grateful for the care and support her family received after her husband suffered a brain aneurysm in 2020. He received surgery at TTSH and recovered within months.

"I connected to support groups

immediately after my husband's health scare and they have helped us immensely," she says.

"When doctors or therapists are brutally honest, we take longer to accept them. When similar things are mentioned by those in your support group, one connects to it more easily because they've lived through a similar situation. At

times, they are able to cushion the blow and help you deal with eventualities gradually.

"Doctors and therapists don't usually have that luxury. Support from both sides is necessary and can complement each other beautifully."

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Tan Tock Seng Hospital volunteer Saritha Viswanadhan, who lost her leg at age eight, helps out in the amputee support group. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

## ask the experts

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## When our thyroid malfunctions

Senior consultant endocrinologist Dr Tay Tunn Lin explains what happens when the hormone-regulating gland is out of sync



Symptoms of hyperthyroidism include heart palpitations, diarrhoea, anxiety and irritability, but the disorder is often treatable. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

One of the most common endocrine disorders affects the thyroid, a gland at the base of the neck which secretes hormones to regulate metabolism. A person may get hyperthyroidism, an excess of thyroid hormones, or hypothyroidism – insufficient production of thyroid hormones.

Dr Tay Tunn Lin from Livingstone Endocrine, Diabetes & Thyroid Clinic explains what happens when you have thyroid disorder and how you can get it treated.

### Q Who is more prone to getting thyroid disorder?

Thyroid disorders tend to be hereditary, and women are more likely to be affected than men.

In hyperthyroidism, those between the ages of 20 to 40 are frequently affected, while hypothyroidism tends to affect those above 60. However, both conditions can occur in any age group.

Some women may also develop hypothyroidism after pregnancy.

Another condition that is quite common is thyroid nodules or lumps, which can be found in 20 to 60 per cent of the population. The majority of these nodules are non-cancerous.

### Q How do you know if you have thyroid disorder?

Symptoms of hyperthyroidism include heart palpitations, tremors, diarrhoea, irregular periods, excessive sweating, increased appetite, weight loss, anxiety and irritability, and insomnia.

If left untreated, it can lead to a serious condition called thyroid storm. This causes confusion, heart failure, kidney failure, liver failure, high fever and even death.

For hypothyroidism, metabolism slows and symptoms include weight gain, constipation, feeling cold easily, lethargy, heavy periods and dry skin. In severe cases, patients can go into a coma and have heart failure.

Small thyroid nodules usually do not cause

symptoms. Larger nodules can, however, be seen as a swelling in the lower part of the neck where the thyroid is. Most are painless.

### Q How does the doctor diagnose you for thyroid disorder?

Your doctor will perform a physical examination of the neck, check for hand tremors, sweaty palms and eye abnormalities.

But a blood test for hormone levels is the most effective way to diagnose thyroid disorders. An ultrasound of the thyroid may be done to check for any thyroid nodule or an enlarged thyroid gland.

For large thyroid nodules, a biopsy may be needed to ensure that they are not cancerous.

### Q I've just been diagnosed with thyroid disorder. What are the treatment options?

For both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism, medication will help to normalise hormone levels.

The dosage will be adjusted based on the patient's response over time. Symptoms will improve once hormone levels stabilise.

It is important to take your medications as prescribed and do not stop taking them unless advised by your doctor.

Specialised treatment known as radioactive iodine is also an option for some hyperthyroid patients if medications are not effective.

Some patients with large thyroid nodules which hinder swallowing or breathing may need surgery to remove the thyroid gland.



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Retirees Sabrina Tan and Lee Chuan Too (both centre) volunteer at Dover Park Hospice. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

## Learning from the dying

Volunteering with dying patients teaches valuable life lessons, say volunteers at Dover Park Hospice.

About 400 volunteers help with patients at the hospice in Jalan Tan Tock Seng. It is a non-profit organisation set up in 1992 to provide comfort and care for people with advanced disease.

The hospice cares for both resident and non-resident patients. Non-residents may use the daycare centre or receive care at home.

Hospice volunteers help take patients out for weekly excursions, organise events and craft activities and even maintain the green spaces at the hospice.

Volunteers also take patients on home care to medical appointments and cut their hair.

Ms Sabrina Tan, 67, a retired bank worker, has been volunteering at the hospice since 2015. One of her tasks is to staff a makeshift "coffee shop" that lets

hospice patients experience the atmosphere of a kopitiam. She also befriends patients and helps with art therapy activities.

Ms Tan likes chatting with patients and seeing them enjoy activities. She recalls a patient in her 90s who gets as excited as a child when she wins a prize.

It can be challenging for some volunteers to deal with the eventual passing of the patients they have come to know. Ms Tan's advice is to "manage your emotions".

"I have friends who told me: 'I can't do your kind of volunteering because I'll become too depressed,'" she says.

"Death is part and parcel of life. If you feel emotional about it, you can't do volunteering in this setting."

She and other volunteers were unable to interact directly with patients in 2020 because of pandemic restrictions. Face-to-face interaction resumed last year with safe management measures in place, and more

volunteers returned this year.

Retired shop assistant Lee Chuan Too, 62, was happy to resume his volunteer sessions at the hospice. He has been volunteering there for the past five years. He helps take patients on weekly outings to national parks or other places of interest.

Excursions require up to three volunteers a patient – one to push a wheelchair, one to hold an umbrella for shade and one to help take photos or otherwise assist.

Patients enjoy the excursions and Mr Lee says interacting with the patients has taught him how to make the most of life.

"In the beginning, you think you are going there to help the patients. If you start volunteering, you realise that the one who really benefits is you," he says.

"I come and learn from them how to age properly. They teach me a lot, like how to make the most of your time."  
**Akshita Nanda**