

SINGAPORE

Volunteers knit inserts to boost breast cancer survivors' confidence

Initiative to make, give out inserts launched as TTSH Breast Clinic celebrates 15 years

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Correspondent

In her quest to find the right filling for her bra after undergoing mastectomy, breast cancer survivor Lyn Ee, 74, discovered Knitted Knockers, soft breast prostheses made from cotton yarn.

"They not only provide a gentler, softer alternative to the traditional breast prosthetics that can be hot and heavy, they also give back to breast cancer survivors their looks, confidence and peace of mind," Ms Ee said.

Today, 10 years after her discovery, the soft mounds of cotton yarn are being distributed free at all restructured hospitals in Singapore to women who have had mastectomy.

Wanting to share her discovery of the prostheses with others here, Ms Ee in 2015 founded Knitted Knockers Singapore, the local chapter of the American non-profit that has expanded internationally, gathering a group of volunteers to knit the bra inserts to give to breast cancer patients.

Knitted Knockers@NHG (National Healthcare Group), where volunteers can knit and distribute the bra inserts, was launched on June 6 by Minister for Digital Development and Information Josephine Teo.

Speaking at an event marking the 15th anniversary of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) Breast Clinic, Mrs Teo cited the initiative as an example of the good work the clinic has done.

"You want to provide the best clinical care and are equally keen to support the emotional well-being of your patients," she said at the event.

Mrs Teo also shared the story of Ms Carmelita Calesagsag, her family's domestic helper who is a breast cancer survivor.

The 61-year-old Filipina, fondly called Carmen by the Teos, has been working for the family for 27 years.

Mrs Teo said: "I remember vividly the day she was diagnosed. After she had reported a lump, Carmen had been sent by our family doctor to be properly tested. Parliament was in session when I received Carmen's phone call. I guessed it was bad news, because she would otherwise have waited till I got home.

"Over the next few weeks, I saw her struggle with fear and despair. Against the advice of some, we decided she should be treated in Singapore instead of being sent home. Now, 17 years later, we are glad we made that choice. Carmen is fully recovered. She watched all three of our children become working adults and remains very much a part of our family."

Breast cancer is the most prevalent cancer among women in Singapore, making up nearly 30 per cent of all cancers diagnosed among women here.

The incidence here has more than tripled over the past 50 years, to 74 cases per 100,000 women now – one of the highest in Asia.

The Breast Clinic has performed more than 6,100 breast cancer sur-



Minister for Digital Development and Information Josephine Teo with Ms Lyn Ee, a breast cancer survivor, at an event marking 15 years of TTSH's Breast Clinic on June 6. Ms Ee started Knitted Knockers Singapore in 2015. Today, the breast prostheses are given to mastectomy patients at restructured hospitals. ST PHOTO: TARYN NG



Polytechnic lecturer Kua Sai Geok was the first patient to undergo endoscopic breast surgery at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. PHOTO: COURTESY OF KUA SAI GEOK



Mrs Josephine Teo in Oxford for her daughter's graduation with her domestic helper, Ms Carmelita Calesagsag, a breast cancer survivor. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOSEPHINE TEO

gical operations since 2010 and over 450 in 2024 alone, the largest number within the NHG cluster last year.

One of the clinic's latest innovations is endoscopic breast surgery that combines keyhole mastectomy with immediate breast reconstruction.

The minimally invasive procedure is performed in the same setting by both a specially trained breast surgeon and a plastic surgeon. Cancerous tissue is removed from the affected breast, which is

immediately reconstructed by the plastic surgeon using the patient's own skin, fat and blood vessels.

Since its introduction at the clinic in November 2024, three patients have undergone this advanced dual procedure.

The first patient to do so was polytechnic lecturer Kua Sai Geok, 62, who was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer during a routine mammogram in 2024.

Describing herself as "a forward-looking person", Madam Kua said she opted for the keyhole mastec-

tomy and reconstructive breast surgery to future-proof her health.

"I did not feel any pain during the four-day stay in hospital... and life was back to normal about four months after my right hand fully recovered with the help of the TTSH physiotherapist," she said.

Dr Ang Wei-Wen, a consultant from Breast Surgery Service at TTSH, however, said that not everyone is suitable for the minimal-scar endoscopic mastectomy and reconstructive surgery.

"This is due to various factors,

BETTER OPTION

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BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR LYN EE, 74, who discovered Knitted Knockers, soft breast prostheses made from cotton yarn, during her quest for the right filling for her bra after her mastectomy.

such as the stage and type of cancer, the patient's overall health, and the location and size of the tumour," he said.

Dr Ang said the next step would be to use robotics for the procedure.

"It is the future of breast surgery and already a trend in South Korea. It has more dexterity than a human surgeon, leading to smaller incisions, reduced pain and faster recovery," he added.

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Paint sculptures and learn about Punggol's history at heritage festival

Savanna Tai

Within the Waterway Point mall in Punggol is a cluster of boulder-like sculptures sporting paint-splattered handprints and brushstrokes.

Made of canvas, the sculptures are part of an interactive art installation meant to represent Punggol's rocky shoreline.

Punggol residents and their children can draw and paint on them as part of an experience to reimagine what is a central part of their neighbourhood.

The installation, titled Colours on Shore, is part of a new heritage initiative that is running from June 6 to 15 in the town.

It is being launched under the National Heritage Board's (NHB) Heritage Activation Nodes (HAN) initiative, which aims to involve the public and local communities in celebrating the heritage of Singapore's neighbourhoods and organising their own heritage programmes.

Punggol is the third town where this initiative has been launched, after similar runs in Katong-Joo Chiat and Clementi in 2024.

The Punggol initiative's curator John Tung said the Punggol area

was once known for its pig farms and for housing Singapore's first zoo, although the town's identity has evolved, and residents have different interpretations of the town now.

"There is a part of Punggol that is historical, for example, the changing history of Punggol Beach, but it's not a fishermen's block anymore," said Mr Tung.

Once a rural fishing village with poultry and pig farms, Punggol began clearing out its pig farms in the 1980s. Construction of the first Housing Board flats began in the late 1990s.

Other heritage programmes being organised in Punggol as part of this initiative include one called Where Punggol Meets Plate, which allows participants to create a three-course food experience using local ingredients such as Nipah palm trees near Punggol Reservoir.

There is also a listening and drawing workshop titled Attuning to Nature that will allow participants to learn about the natural and environmental histories of Punggol and Coney Island.

These programmes are co-organised with more than 10 community partners, and in partnership with art organisation OH! Open House.

Interested participants can sign



People drawing and painting on boulder-like sculptures, meant to represent Punggol's rocky shoreline, at the Colours on Shore installation at Waterway Point on June 6. It is part of a new heritage initiative in the town. PHOTO: LIANHE ZHAOBAO

up at go.gov.sg/han-whats-on. NHB's director for education and community outreach, Mr Gerald Wee, hopes the initiative will bring Punggol's history to life, and high-

light natural spaces like Coney Island, as well as landmarks such as Punggol Jetty and Punggol Settlement.

Mr Wee said previous launches

of the initiative have drawn good feedback and "brought together diverse communities to uncover and share neighbourhood stories".

"As we launch HAN@Punggol

with OH! Open House, we look forward to expanding this vibrant community of heritage enthusiasts, and deepening connections between communities and their neighbourhood's heritage," he said.

Ms Chua Sze Hwei, 37, a homemaker who has lived in Punggol for about a decade, is looking forward to the heritage programmes.

"I think it would be great if the initiatives can attract people to see how young and how vibrant the community is in Punggol," she said.

OH! Open House and NHB also plan to go further with the initiative. In July, they intend to mobilise volunteers to go door to door around Punggol to invite households to have their portraits drawn and gather stories about their neighbourhood.

This will be part of a three-year community initiative to create a directory of local stories that can be displayed in Punggol's public spaces.

OH! Open House's artistic director, Mr Alan Oei, said: "Heritage isn't just something we visit in a museum – it's in the stories passed down at void decks, in the everyday rituals we don't even realise we're part of."

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