

Long road ahead in bid to eliminate cervical cancer

300 cases of largely preventable disease still surface yearly; vaccination, screening key

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Correspondent

Cervical cancer is almost entirely preventable through vaccination and regular screenings, but Singapore still has a long way to go before it can totally get rid of this disease as a public health problem.

About 300 new cases of cervical cancer still surface here a year.

Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by an infection by human papillomavirus (HPV), a common group of viruses transmitted through sexual contact that usually causes no symptoms. Thirteen of the 150 varieties of HPV stay in the body for a long time and are known to cause 99.7 per cent of cervical cancers.

"The unique part of cervical cancer is that it is largely preventable

through vaccination and early detection of pre-cancer stage. This will need to reach above 90 per cent to be near our eradication goal," obstetrician and gynaecologist Christopher Chong said.

It was almost two decades ago in 2006 that the HPV vaccine was introduced. It is strongly recommended for girls from age nine to women up to the age of 26. This is the age range deemed to be more exposed to HPV.

However, it was only in 2019 that fully subsidised HPV vaccinations were offered to all 13-year-old Secondary 1 female students in Singapore on an opt-in basis.

The vaccines here protect against strains that are most likely to cause cancer and genital warts.

The World Health Organisation has set a target for cervical cancer to be eliminated by 2120. Experts

in Australia are highly optimistic that the country will achieve this by its 2035 target, while Britain on Wednesday said it will be one of the first in the world to eliminate the cancer in the next two decades.

"We are still far from eliminating cervical cancer in Singapore, with about 300 new cases a year," Dr Chong said.

He said there is an uptake of about 91 per cent for the vaccination among 13-year-old girls because it is free, "otherwise, it may not even reach 50 per cent".

"Many also may not know what they are getting is the bivalent vaccine that protects against two varieties of HPV that cause 70 per cent of cervical cancers. So even if they have taken this, they should consider taking the nonavalent one as additional protection - it covers nine strains or up to 90 per cent of cervical cancer prevention."

A proportion of vaccinating boys and young men as well, Dr Chong said the vaccine also protects against all other cancers caused by



Businesswoman Shirley Wong was 42 when she first saw a gynaecologist for unusual bleeding, and was told that she had Stage 2 cervical cancer. She is currently in remission, having passed the five-year mark. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SHIRLEY WONG

HPV, such as anal, mouth and throat. Vaccination also prevents them from spreading the virus.

"Unfortunately, the estimated male vaccination rate in Singapore is less than 5 per cent," he said.

Apart from vaccination, cervical screening for women aged 25 to 64 provides another form of defence, allowing early intervention. This includes a yearly pap smear to check for changes to the cells in the cervix caused by HPV and an HPV test every five years.

Cervical cancer screening should not stop after 64, he advised. "Screening should be as long as one has a cervix."

Businesswoman Shirley Wong, 48, was 42 when she first saw a gynaecologist. "I had unusual bleeding between my period while holidaying with friends in South Korea in December 2016. When we got back, they took me to see the gynaecologist," she said.

It was then she was told that she had Stage 2 cervical cancer.

Shocked by the news, Ms Wong sought a second opinion from her sister-in-law's doctor, who gave her the same diagnosis and advised her to go for surgery immediately.

She was "tremendously upset and terribly depressed" that her

womb and ovaries were removed a week after her consultation, said Ms Wong, who has been married for 19 years. "I felt so hopeless then, and I still do, that I can no longer bear my own children," she said, her voice breaking.

Her silver lining is that she is currently in remission, having passed the five-year mark.

"I hope that by telling my story, other women would go for regular checks and pap smears and, if possible, they should also take the vaccine to lessen the risk of forming cervical cancer," Ms Wong added.

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Orchard Road aglow with Christmas 'clouds'



Singapore's famous shopping belt was set aglow with white, yellow, pink and turquoise "clouds" on Thursday night, as the guest of honour, President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, accompanied by his wife, Ms Jane Ittogi, officiated the Christmas on A Great Street Community Chest Light-Up Ceremony at Shaw House Urban Plaza, heralding the holiday season. Along with Christmas trees, bells, teddy bears, reindeer and candy canes, Orchard Road expects a bigger, more exciting holiday season in 2023, with the first Christmas Eve street party and three Great Christmas Villages to woo visitors. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

\$5.8m initiative to tackle breathlessness in seniors

Zhaki Abdullah

A new network of care services will be developed to treat breathlessness in seniors with chronic lung and heart conditions here, and will receive funding of \$5.8 million over five years.

On Thursday, the Lien Foundation and Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) said the Breathlessness Ecosystem will equip and provide training to community-based services such as active ageing centres and hospice day care centres to handle patients with breathlessness out of a hospital setting.

When ready, it will be available to patients across the National Healthcare Group's (NHG) network of hospitals, including TTSH, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital and Woodlands Health, polyclinics and private primary care clinics.

About \$5.4 million of the funding will come from the Lien Foundation, while the remaining amount will be in the form of in-kind contributions from TTSH.

The two organisations said the initiative aims to reduce healthcare costs by keeping patients out of hospitals, noting that heart and lung failures generate the highest healthcare expenditure among advanced illnesses in Singapore.

In a local study published in the medical journal Age And Ageing in



Mr Suresh, a senior therapy assistant at Awwa, assisting Madam Wong Siew Sin with light exercises as part of the Air Master service, which aims to help those with lung and heart conditions manage their breathlessness. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

October 2021, researchers found that in their last year of life, patients with heart failure spent \$49,900 and patients with lung failure \$42,900 - outstripping the \$31,200 spent by cancer patients.

Lien Foundation chief executive officer Lee Poh Wah said hospitals and community partners would work together to offer a palliative care approach for patients in the early stages of heart and lung disease, focusing on the symptoms of their conditions.

"By building the ecosystem of services in the community, we hope to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable patients and their care-

givers while averting unnecessary hospitalisations," said Mr Lee.

Symptoms of breathlessness, or dyspnoea, include shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, and a feeling of suffocation.

Up to 90 per cent of people here with chronic heart and lung disease are affected by dyspnoea.

One feature of the new ecosystem, the Air Master service, is in place, with Awwa, Ren Ci Hospital and St Luke's Eldercare helping patients with chronic lung and heart conditions learn to manage their symptoms of breathlessness.

The 10-week service includes cardiopulmonary rehabilitation

sessions to build physical strength and endurance, patient education on how to better manage the conditions and anxiety reduction. Air Master is fully subsidised, and patients get transport vouchers to help them get to their sessions.

The service, which was rolled out in October, hopes to help about 800 patients over five years.

"Air Master is bringing together care from different specialties - rehabilitation, cardiology, respiratory, palliative, and allied health - for a community-based approach to helping patients manage their breathlessness and other debilitating symptoms," said Breathlessness Ecosystem project lead Neo Han Yee.

"Through continued efforts to increase awareness and access to early rehabilitation, we want more patients to start managing their symptoms early, slow their functional decline, and reduce the need for hospitalisations throughout the trajectory of their disease, which can last for many years," said Dr Neo, who is also palliative medicine head at TTSH.

An 83-year-old patient with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, who wanted to be known only as Mr Lee, told reporters that Air Master had helped him manage his breathlessness, making it easier for him to get around.

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Ubisoft opens 3-storey studio, expands training for game developers

Osmond Chia

Video game giant Ubisoft has opened a larger studio at one-north, spread across three storeys, for its 450 game developers and employees, coinciding with its 15th year operating in Singapore.

The studio will focus on the development of titles in the popular Assassin's Creed series, as well as the naval action video game Skull And Bones - the first big-budget title led by Ubisoft Singapore - among other projects.

The French game publisher will cast a wider net to nurture and capture talent here by increasing its training programmes, including an introductory video game development course.

The programme, which is being discussed with Nanyang Polytechnic, will be designed to provide gaming enthusiasts with basic knowledge of the skills needed to make games, Ubisoft Singapore human resource director Desiree Tan told The Straits Times at the studio's launch on Thursday.

The course will be run over a few days and will offer "a more hands-on and experiential" learning environment for up to 25 people each time, said Ms Tan.

Ubisoft will also partner creative media institution 3dsense Media School to teach courses on concept art, visual effects and animation specific to Ubisoft's workflow.

Ubisoft Singapore managing director Darryl Long said the programmes are not just for the purpose of recruitment, but also to build talent in Singapore.

"To build a successful gaming industry in the country, you need a solid foundation of talent that can train new incoming talent."

"The video game industry is still seen by parents and many as a niche industry, but that's really not the case any more... It employs thousands of people and it's a \$200 billion a year industry," he

said.

With new training and recruitment initiatives, and the revamped studio, Ubisoft recent years has seen its roots here as Singapore recently announced its intent to be a regional hub for gaming, to tap South-east Asia's video gaming market, which is worth US\$5 billion (S\$6.8 billion) and has 270 million gamers.

The video games sector was the fastest-growing field driving the nation's digital economy in recent years, according to a report by the Infocomm Media Development Authority in October.

Ubisoft is among the largest game developers that have set up shop here. Its Singapore team has expanded from a handful in 2008 to a staff of 450, and around 800 Singaporean gaming talents have contributed to Ubisoft's video games in that time.

Nearly 150 interns from local institutions have been hired by Ubisoft Singapore.

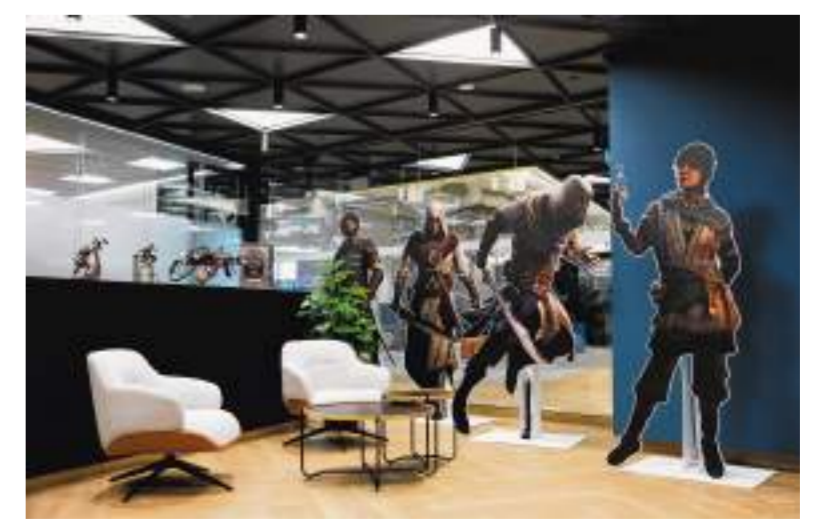
The new three-floor premises at the Solaris building will serve as a gaming production hub for Ubisoft to build games.

An undisclosed sum was given to Ubisoft by the authorities in 2016 to develop a triple-A (or AAA) game title in Singapore, which is believed to be Skull And Bones. But the project, which began production in 2013, has been plagued by delays that have stretched its development to a decade - unusually long for the industry, and well past its initial 2018 launch date.

Mr Long said at the studio's launch that Skull And Bones will be rolled out by the end of Ubisoft's fiscal year in March 2024.

"We embarked on a project that has made us famous - or shall I say infamous - with a brand-new IP (intellectual property) in Skull And Bones," said Mr Long. "It will be the first AAA game led and shipped in South-east Asia, (and) it offers an exciting pirate adventure unlike any other."

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Ubisoft Singapore's new studio is littered with standees of its video game characters and memorabilia familiar to gamers. PHOTO: UBISOFT SINGAPORE