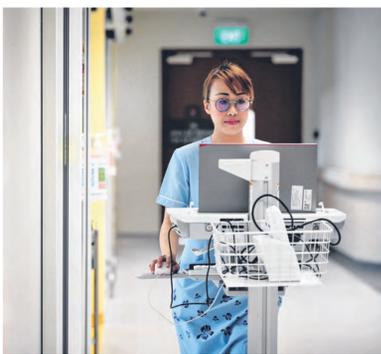


Coronavirus: Front-line Fighters



With 13 years of nursing experience behind her, nurse clinician Priscilla Fu from the National Centre for Infectious Diseases is unfazed even when she has to take swabs from a coronavirus patient's nose or throat.

All in a day's work for cool-headed nurse

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

The close to 70 coronavirus patients here may have the whole country in a bit of a panic, but for nurse clinician Priscilla Fu, 31, it is all in a day's work at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.

With 13 years of experience behind her, Ms Fu is unfazed even when she has to take swabs from the nose or the back of the throat of a patient confirmed to be infected with the coronavirus.

This process requires two nurses. The one going into the patient's room – which is separated from the ward by two doors, of which only one can open at a time – has to "gown up" and wear an N95 mask.

She is the one who has to stick the swab – which is like a long cotton bud – into the nose or throat, twist it a little to get some tissue, then place that into a biohazard bag.

That bag is then dropped into another biohazard bag for double security.

The other nurse waits in the antechamber, between the two doors.

NO FEAR

All nurses are trained in infection control... So I know what to do and I'm not afraid.



NURSE CLINICIAN PRISCILLA FU who works at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, on handling test swabs from patients.

She places an empty box into a small area where things can be passed between the people in the anteroom and the patient's isolation room.

She closes the door to that area so the nurse in the room can drop the bag with the swab into the box, being careful not to touch the box at all.

When the nurse inside closes the door to the area, the one outside can then retrieve the box and send it to the laboratory.

"All nurses are trained in infection control," Ms Fu says. "So I know what to do and I'm not afraid."

Furthermore, she says, the coronavirus patients are generally very cooperative.

The patients are of all ages and different nationalities, but they seem to have two things in common: Everyone wants to know what to expect, and how to connect to Wi-Fi.

So the nurses make it a point to give them detailed explanations when they are first admitted, and help them get Wi-Fi – after which those who are not too sick are happily chatting with friends and family on their mobile phones.

There was one Chinese patient who felt lonely, so a medical social worker colleague of Ms Fu's spent some time chatting with the patient on the phone – she had to do so from outside, since all coronavirus patients are in isolation.

Ms Fu says the nurses are all working normal shifts and getting their days off, so no one gets too tired.

And the best reward for all the nurses, she says, "is the satisfaction we get when patients are well, get discharged, and tell us how grateful they are and thank us for our care".

salma@sph.com.sg



Nurse clinician Priscilla Fu going through the first steps in the process of donning personal protective equipment – putting on an N95 mask, goggles and shower cap. She has to "gown up" in this way when she enters an isolation room in which a coronavirus patient is warded. ST PHOTOS: JASON QUAH

TAKING ON THE CORONAVIRUS

What is it like coming face to face with a threatening virus every day? Workers on the front lines share what they go through in the fight against the coronavirus



(From left) 2 Deputy Director Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and Senior Assistant Commissioner of Police Lian Ghim Hua; assistant director, analytics research and technology development, Ms Linda Teo; ASP Tan Yong Zhi and ASP Tew Meng Hwee are all pitching in to help out in the coronavirus fight. ST PHOTO: JOEL CHAN

Police helping MOH in contact tracing

When the Singapore Police Force was roped in to help trace contacts of coronavirus cases, officer Tew Meng Hwee put up his hand.

"I wanted to get involved because I know I can contribute," said the Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP).

ASP Tew, the deputy officer in charge of the Specialised Crime Branch, knew that the police had been involved in contact tracing during the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome in 2003, and so was prepared to help out this time round.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) is overall in charge of contact tracing operations and the police are called in to help in some cases.

Where the "activity log" of a patient is incomplete and further verification needed, the police will come in to support MOH, said Senior Assistant Commissioner of Police Lian Ghim Hua, the 2 Deputy Director of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

The structure of contact tracing goes like this:

The MOH carries out what is known as "backward tracing" of the movements of a patient for the two weeks prior to him getting symptoms. This will identify links to other cases and potential sources of transmission.

MOH officers also do "forward tracing" to identify who the patient had mixed with after getting symptoms. These people may need to be quarantined and tested if unwell.

Over at the police, several teams perform different roles.

A group at the CID Command Centre coordinates with MOH. A second team focuses on interviewing patients and close contacts to flesh out the patient's activity log.

A third group reviews the data collected, and a fourth group of officers from across the force tracks down the contacts MOH has not been able to reach.

Ms Linda Teo, assistant director of the police's analytics research and technology development, said tech tools like data visualisation and word clouds can help draw links between patients.

This was how the dots were connected leading to the realisation of a cluster at The Life Church and Missions in Paya Lebar.

ASP Tan Yong Zhi, the officer in charge of the crime strike force at Marina Bay Neighbourhood Police Centre, said there are mixed reactions when people are told they may have been in contact with a patient.

"Some are fearful, some will be evasive, and some will say, 'No, I'm fine. I'm not sick. I'm feeling okay,'" he said.

"We will try to assure them that, don't worry, we are not here to say you are a confirmed case, but just sharing that MOH may be looking for you."

The work comes with some risk but it's all in a day's work for the officers.

ASP Tew, who has gone down to interview patients, said: "My wife wants me to clean myself first after the operation before I go home, so I will do that diligently."

Sumiko Tan



Superintendent Toh Lai Keng, Deputy Commander (Ground Operations), Airport Command, with a screening officer at the checkpoint for arrivals at Changi Airport's Terminal 3. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

More ICA officers volunteering than needed

Tee Zhuo

The day 92 Singaporeans came home on a special Scoot flight from Wuhan, seven Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) officers were waiting to receive them at Changi Airport.

Superintendent (Supt) Toh Lai Keng, Deputy Commander (Ground Operations), Airport Command, was one of them.

He felt it was important to be on the ground with his officers, all of whom had volunteered to screen those returning with full knowledge of the risks.

"We had more volunteers than we required," Supt Toh, 49, said, his voice tinged with pride.

The fact that Wuhan was the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak also meant that the passengers evacuated were of a very high

risk level, he said. To make sure this was properly managed, Gate F55 at Terminal 2 was specially prepared to receive them on Jan 30, away from passengers on normal flights.

As a precaution, the officers who volunteered wore full protective gear, including masks and gowns.

Supt Toh said he decided to join his six front-line officers to instil confidence – and walk the talk.

"We tell our officers, we are always there for you, whenever you need us. Crisis is the best time to prove that this isn't just lip service," said Supt Toh, who has served in the ICA for 25 years.

In the first one to two weeks of the coronavirus situation, formulating policies was the biggest challenge, he said. "It was quite hectic. Policies were changing every other day with the situation, and there were many joint meetings,"

he said, adding that regular briefings to ground team leaders helped in relaying information quickly.

Although the sheer volume and variety of places of origin of travellers mean the air checkpoint has a high degree of exposure, morale on the ground remains high, he said. Screening officers do shifts of between seven hours and 10 hours, but their contact with each traveller is transient, lasting only about one to two minutes.

With traveller traffic down significantly, he is also using the downtime to engage officers more closely and provide training.

"We're learning a lot from this crisis, from our contingency plans to how we work with each other. On the ground, officers have also become more united," he said.

Having an understanding family helps. His 10-year-old son is "quite knowledgeable" about the ongoing coronavirus situation, and his wife, who is also an ICA officer, understands what he needs to do.

"On the ground, we are in good spirits. To us, it is about serving our fellow Singaporeans," he said.

teezhuo@sph.com.sg

WALKING THE TALK

We tell our officers, 'we are always there for you, whenever you need us'. Crisis is the best time to prove that this isn't just lip service.



SUPERINTENDENT (SUPT) TOH LAI KENG, Deputy Commander (Ground Operations), Airport Command.

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