

TTSH staff shunned by drivers, turned away by hotels

Some have chosen not to wear uniform when commuting

Cheryl Tan and Natalie Tan

On May 5, a few days after the emergence of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) Covid-19 cluster, Mr Nigel Rankine tried to book a hotel stay but was told he could not be accommodated.

The 27-year-old staff nurse works at TTSH. He decided to move out of his place provisionally to avoid exposing his elderly parents to the risk of contracting the coronavirus. Both his parents are immunocompromised: His mother is a cancer patient and his father is recovering from heart bypass surgery.

He had applied a few times for al-

ternative accommodation with TTSH, but knew it would take some time to get a spot.

The hospital said it has been working with hotels and accommodation providers to find lodging for its affected staff.

Mr Rankine eventually found a hotel on his own but was told that bookings were not available.

But a friend who called the hotel was told otherwise. When Mr Rankine pressed for answers, the hotel said it accepted only staycation bookings.

Mr Rankine had earlier told the hotel, which he declined to name, that he worked at TTSH. He inferred from its response that this was why it had rejected him.

"The response I got was a little off-putting. If they had been truthful and honest from the start, it would have been less damaging," said Mr Rankine.

After failing to book a hotel room on his own, he reached out to TTSH

once again and was finally able to get a hotel booking on that day. "I'm thankful for the speed and how TTSH has helped give my family and me peace of mind," he said.

Mr Rankine said he thought it fair that the hotel he first approached wanted to protect its staff and guests, just as he was protecting his family, but did not appreciate the lack of honesty.

"I don't expect people to treat us differently or put us on a pedestal just because we are healthcare workers. But they should at least speak to us like we're human and not some kind of parasite," he said.

Reports of other TTSH healthcare workers being shunned by the public or having to move out of their homes have surfaced.

The hospital cluster has 46 Covid-19 cases linked to it as at Sunday, with around 1,000 staff placed on quarantine.

Another nurse, who wanted to remain anonymous, told The Straits

Times that she has been staying in a hotel since last Wednesday as part of TTSH's accommodation arrangements for its staff.

"I wanted to segregate myself from other people and minimise contact with my landlord, who is elderly," said the 26-year-old.

She added that her neighbours avoid her when they see her approaching from afar.

A day after the cluster was announced, she tried to flag down a cab to get to the hospital. She said of the driver: "He asked me a lot of questions, like why I was heading there, when did I get my vaccination, and what was my swab test result. I answered all of his questions but he still rejected me in the end," she said.

This happened with another taxi driver too and after that, she made it a point to stick to public transport and to refrain from wearing the TTSH uniform when commuting.

Likewise, Dr Keefe Tan, a regis-

trar at the hospital, said that his Grab driver had cancelled his ride, seconds after finding out that he had booked one to TTSH.

"It's been difficult to get a ride despite the map showing that there are many cars around the area," said the 32-year-old.

Asked if he had been using GrabCare, a dedicated service which aims to ferry healthcare workers to and from hospitals, Dr Tan said that it was still difficult to get a ride through the service but the situation was better compared with last year.

A spokesman for Grab said the company has conducted another recruitment drive to get more volunteer driver-partners to further support Singapore's healthcare workers. It now has more than 12,000 driver-partners who have volunteered for its GrabCare fleet.

While Dr Tan said he understands why people might be fearful of TTSH healthcare workers, he cannot help feeling a little "sad and disappointed".

"My colleagues and I are more than willing to put ourselves at risk every day for them and it would be nice to know that others are standing together with us. In times like these, I just wish more people would step up instead of turn the other way," he said.

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TACKLING MANPOWER LOSS

We had to deal with a significant loss of manpower, and needed to shuffle (staff) around to ensure patient care was managed, while keeping up the morale of staff who were under quarantine order. When your own staff and friends are suddenly affected by something unknown, it can hit home quite strongly.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HABEEBUL RAHMAN, chairman of the hospital's well-being committee.

After a Covid-19 cluster emerged at Tan Tock Seng Hospital last month, the hospital quickly set up a dedicated team to care for the well-being of staff under quarantine, among other measures to provide support to its staff. ST PHOTO



Hospital boosts efforts to support well-being of staff

Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) has stepped up efforts to provide support to staff, who have been under pressure to contain the Covid-19 outbreak at the hospital.

These include forming a support team for patients and staff who had to be quarantined, mobilising trained welfare officers, and conducting workshops and online learning modules to promote mental health among the staff.

The TTSH cluster emerged after a nurse tested positive for Covid-19 last month. This is Singapore's first hospital cluster.

Associate Professor Habeebul Rahman, chairman of the hospital's

well-being committee, said one of the biggest challenges when news of the cluster broke was being separated from the approximately 1,000 staff who were quarantined.

"We had to deal with a significant loss of manpower, and needed to shuffle (staff) around to ensure patient care was managed, while keeping up the morale of staff who were under quarantine order," said Prof Habeebul. "When your own staff and friends are suddenly affected by something unknown, it can hit home quite strongly."

A dedicated team was quickly formed to care for the well-being of staff under quarantine, by direct-

ing them to helplines for emotional support and retrieving items for staff at quarantine facilities.

Prof Habeebul said the hospital was in a better position to respond to the cluster after dealing with the pandemic for over a year. "It felt like a confident crisis response."

For instance, welfare officers have been appointed in each department over the last year to look after staff well-being.

An app named BotMD has also been available since March last year for staff to access mental health modules, where they can plot their mood graphs and chat with a bot to navigate feelings of distress.

The staff themselves have come up with ways to boost morale. Prof Habeebul said a group of nurses under quarantine had come together online for activities such as zumba over Zoom and virtual Mother's Day celebrations.

Beyond mental health, TTSH has worked to support staff who have had trouble finding a place to stay. With help from the Health Ministry, the hospital has partnered hotels to provide alternative accommodation for staff, with the costs supported by TTSH, said Mr Dominic Tung, the hospital's assistant director for human resource wellness.

Mr Tung said Grab has come forward to offer an on-demand service, known as GrabCare, to ferry staff to and from TTSH with the guarantee that bookings would not be cancelled. There have been about 1,600 sign-ups for it so far.

This comes amid reports of TTSH staff being shunned by members of the public and denied ser-

vices. "We recognise that there may be initial fear among members of the public or service providers... We take these risks and reactions in our stride," said Mr Tung.

But there have also been efforts from the community to show appreciation for TTSH staff.

Central Singapore Community Development Council and bubble tea brand Gong Cha are giving all 12,000 TTSH staff appreciation packs that include a free drink voucher from Gong Cha.

Ride-hailing service Gojek will also distribute ride vouchers worth \$10 each to hospital staff.

Prof Habeebul said: "I think what was truly heartwarming for us was that very quickly, other members of the public came in to offer their support and the next thing we know, we've got goodwill pouring in. Letting (TTSH staff) know that the rest of the country was behind them was very helpful."

Natalie Tan and Cheryl Tan

Businessman linked to \$1b alleged fraud case faces more charges

Wong Shiying

A Singaporean businessman linked to the alleged fraud of more than \$1 billion has had more cheating charges brought against him.

Ng Yu Zhi, 34, was charged with seven counts of cheating involving more than \$23 million yesterday.

The latest charges are in addition

to 11 counts of cheating, fraudulent trading and forgery he has racked up since his arrest in February.

Ng, the director of Envy Asset Management and Envy Global Trading, is said to have swindled investors into putting at least \$1 billion into nickel deals that never took place.

The investors were promised varying returns averaging 15 per cent over three months.

With the latest charges, he is accused of deceiving seven individuals and firms between September last year and January this year into buying some receivables from Envy Global Trading's purported sale of nickel to a firm called Rafionet, but there was no such transaction.

They paid sums ranging from \$650,000 to \$14 million.

In total, they were cheated of

more than \$23 million.

As at May 4, at least four lawsuits have been filed by investors seeking to claim some \$50 million from Envy Global Trading and Ng.

The Commercial Affairs Department has seized about \$100 million of assets from him.

Neither of Ng's firms is licensed by the Monetary Authority of Singapore.

Ng, who is represented by Mr

Navin Thevar from Davinder Singh Chambers, is out on bail of \$1.5 million. He has to continue wearing an electronic tag, and comply with a curfew from 10pm to 6am.

His bail is believed to be the highest sum imposed since electronic monitoring was introduced as a condition of bail in 2018. He is expected to return to court on June 28.

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Weather

SINGAPORE

24/32°C

THUNDERY SHOWERS



Thundery showers over many areas in the morning.

OUTLOOK

Wednesday: Afternoon thundery showers.

Thursday: Late morning and early afternoon thundery showers.

AIR QUALITY

PSI 24-36 (Good)
24-hour reading as of 6pm yesterday



Rise 6.56am

Set 7.07pm



Rise 12.06pm

Set 12am

TIDES

Today: 2am (2.7m), 9.03am (0.5m), 4.26pm (2.2m), 9.05pm (1.6m).

Tomorrow: 2.45am (2.6m), 10.01am (0.6m), 5.28pm (2.2m), 10.13pm (1.6m).