

Coronavirus pandemic



A sign at the entrance to a ward for treating Covid-19 patients at Tan Tock Seng Hospital reminding medical staff to don their personal protective equipment before entering. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



Exhaust fans installed at the windows in a Covid-19 ward at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. They draw out the air and create constant ventilation. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



A nurse preparing to don her personal protective gear. Tan Tock Seng Hospital is one of the hospitals that have had to cope with the spike in infection cases in Singapore. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

2 hospitals convert wards to care for virus patients

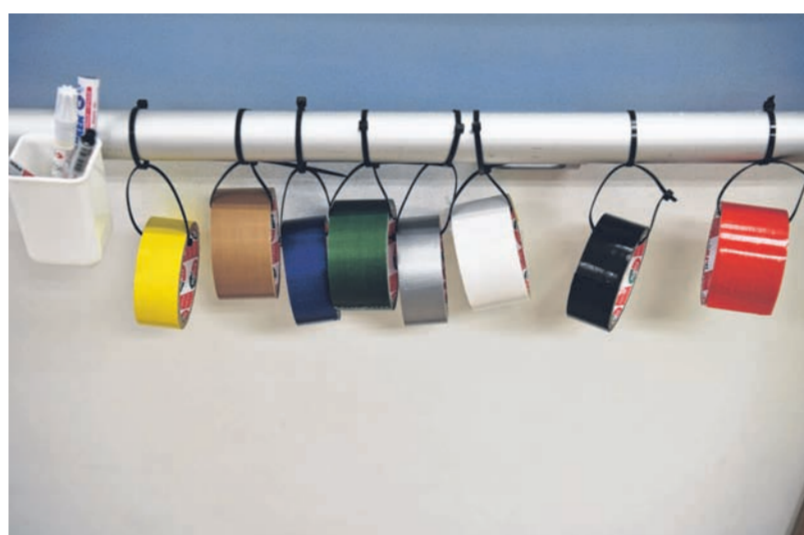
TTSH, Alexandra Hospital prepare for surge in cases by adding beds, equipping nurses

Timothy Goh

When the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) virus hit Singapore in 2003, Dr Hoi Shu Yin, then a front-line nurse at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), saw the uncertainties and damage it caused. So, in recent weeks, when the number of Covid-19 cases started to rise, the 41-year-old dug deep into her Sars experience to get the hospital ready to cope with the surge in patients. The deputy director of nursing at TTSH said yesterday: "We learnt a lot from Sars, so our response is one of preparedness, and we are able to anticipate quite clearly what steps to take, even before the situation materialises. "Even before we saw the exponential surge (in Covid-19 cases), we were already well under way in our preparations." TTSH, which is under the National Healthcare Group, is one of several hospitals that have had to cope with the spike in infection cases. It did so by converting the wards on two of its 13 floors into areas dedicated to treating only Covid-19 patients earlier this month. With that change, there are now 230 more beds for Covid-19 patients in TTSH, as well as 36 beds in its intensive care unit (ICU) for

those with more severe symptoms. Dr Hoi and fellow deputy director of nursing Laura Ho, 48, are in the team of 10 nursing leaders behind the changes. Dr Hoi explained: "Nurses are in charge of the wards, so we have to make sure they are equipped with the right facilities to take care of the patients and ensure their safety." Converting a ward into a specialised Covid-19 one is not a simple process. Four key factors are taken into account. First, the wards that are selected have to be the right ones. Dr Hoi said TTSH avoided converting wards that deal with cardiac patients, as those have specialised equipment and facilities. Also given a miss were wards with nurses who care for stroke patients, as they have undergone specialised training. As a result, the chosen ones were the surgical and general medicine wards as the hospital has other facilities to care for these patients. Second, the right infrastructure has to be put in place. Giant exhaust fans were installed in some of the chosen wards to turn them into negative pressure rooms. Signs were also put up to remind staff to take precautions as they were now in Covid-19 wards. Third is the human element. Ms Ho said it is a balancing act

between sending the optimal number of staff to the new wards to avoid exhausting the nurses or compromising patient safety, and ensuring that critical operations elsewhere in the hospital are not affected. Fourth, those deployed must be equipped with the right skills. Some would have previously worked in other wards before being trained to care for Covid-19 patients. Such nurses are given special training, including drills on how to handle specimens taken from patients or transporting patients on the correct route. An important part of equipping these nurses and staff is peer support. Ms Ho said: "The situation can change any time, we must be ready for any (change). We have to constantly engage the ground to reassure them, to make sure our staff are ready." Another institution taking measures to cope with the surge in cases is Alexandra Hospital, which is under the National University Health System healthcare cluster. It has cared for 259 Covid-19 patients since the start of the outbreak, about 200 of whom are migrant workers. A spokesman for the hospital said its bed capacity has been increased by more than 30 per cent, with about 100 beds set aside for coronavirus patients. The hospital has also converted two empty wards into isolation wards with negative pressure rooms, and two general wards into



Colour tape for staff to indicate their roles. They do so by writing their name on a piece of tape of a colour corresponding to their role, and then attaching it to their attire. A sign (below) guides them on how to do so. ST PHOTOS: KUA CHEE SIONG



Covid-19 wards for patients who do not need oxygen support. Three rooms in an isolation ward were converted into ICU rooms. Overseeing the opening of some of the new wards was assistant director of nursing Doreen Heng, a veteran of 24 years who previously helped turn a disused ward into a

ward for Sars patients. "Due to the fast-evolving nature of the situation, the teams at the hospital have had to be nimble, flexible and efficient in adapting to the changing face of the pandemic," she said. timgoh@sph.com.sg

Man charged over fake news on supermarket closures

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Kenneth Lai Yong Hui, 40, is accused of posting the false information on Facebook group "Taxiuncle".

A 40-year-old Singaporean man has been charged over false claims he allegedly made that supermarkets would open only two days a week as

part of enhanced measures here. Kenneth Lai Yong Hui is accused of posting the false information on Facebook group "Taxiuncle", saying he had received information that enhanced Covid-19 circuit breaker measures would be rolled out on April 18. The Singaporean was hauled to court yesterday and charged with communicating a false message. The Straits Times understands that Lai is a taxi driver. He is believed to be the first person to be charged with the offence during the coronavirus outbreak. Those convicted can be jailed for

up to three years and face a maximum fine of \$10,000. According to court documents, he allegedly posted the false message saying he had "intel" that extended measures in Singapore would purportedly be imposed on April 18. Police revealed details of his alleged message yesterday. They said that between April 15 and 16, Lai wrote: "Food courts, coffee shop (sic) all to close. Supermarkets will only open two days a week. "Better go stock up your stuff for the next month or so. Government officials (were) in (a) meeting

yesterday and will finalise measures tomorrow." He is said to have done this in a Bishan flat. Yesterday, Lai told the court that he intends to plead guilty, and regrets his actions. He said: "I am very sorry and remorseful for what I had done." He will be back in court on May 27. In their statement, police said they will not hesitate to take action against those who transmit or communicate falsehoods. "Members of the public should refer to official sources for information and avoid spreading unsubstan-

Several motor workshops told to close within 48 hours

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Barbers and bubble tea shops are not the only ones affected by enhanced measures to stem the coronavirus outbreak. Several motor workshops have been given up to 48 hours from receipt of notice to close, including those which had previously received permission to remain open. In response to queries from The Straits Times, the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) pointed to new rules which rescind permission given earlier to motor workshops to continue doing emergency repairs and servicing vehicles used for essential services. MTI said the move was based on a decision to reduce the movement of people further to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. "We are acutely aware that the circuit breaker will disrupt businesses and may be painful, but it is also essential in the fight against Covid-19," it said. However, it is not a blanket ruling, with some workshops permitted to carry on. Ms Jasmine Wong, chief executive of Inchcape Singapore and Greater China, said its Suzuki and Toyota operations are not affected by the change of rules. "Every job we do, we request verification that it is approved before proceeding," she said, adding that Inchcape has been sticking strictly to all guidelines. "We have not received any notice or rescind order at all." ComfortDelGro's Spark workshops are also allowed to continue providing emergency repair services. But several other workshops – including those operated by authorised vehicle dealers – received e-mails from last Saturday on the change. Ford dealer Vantage got its notice yesterday morning. Managing director Christopher Chin said it is appealing against the order as it has supplied vehicles to the police as well as the military, and would like to be able to continue servicing those. ST understands that other affected authorised agents include multi-franchise group Wearnes Automotive, Nissan agent Tan Chong Motor and BMW agent Performance Motors. Mr Sylvester Han, head of operations at independent workshop Car Doctor, said: "We were surprised because we were down to only two workers, from the usual five, so we thought we were safe. "But no choice. We just have to follow the rules and do our part in stopping this virus." Workshops asked to close said the business impact is not significant as the volume of vehicles has shrunk by 80 per cent or more. MTI said the latest decision keeps the list of businesses that are permitted to operate to a minimum. "Appeals will generally not be granted," it added. Tyre shops are also affected. AL Tyres informed customers on Facebook it will cease operations from April 29 "till further notice". "Those who have tyre issues have till Tuesday to solve all your problems," it added. Stamford Tyres, however, continues to operate as it says its clients include bus operators SMRT and Tower Transit, and port operator PSA Corp – which are among essential services. christan@sph.com.sg

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