



Mr Christopher Soh, this year's winner of the President's Award for Nurses, is the second male nurse from Tan Tock Seng Hospital to win the award. The 44-year-old, who has been at TTSH for more than 20 years, obtained his nursing diploma from Nanyang Polytechnic in 1996 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science (Nursing) with Distinction from Curtin University of Technology in 2011. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

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'It was like a tap which kept dripping'

President's Award For Nurses recipient talks about fighting Covid-19, tackling a flood of cases



Wong Kim Hoh

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Christopher Soh has been up since 5.30am, roused by a call about a staff member's possible exposure to Covid-19 in a public place.

The assistant director of nursing at the emergency department (ED) of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) immediately sprang into action, initiating contact tracing and follow-up measures to eliminate risks of a cluster forming.

"Fortunately, it turned out to be a false alarm," he says.

He then spent the morning at work, garbed in the PPE (personal protective equipment) that has become de rigueur for all front-line workers in the past 20 months.

The past three weeks have been frenzied for healthcare workers like him as Singapore grapples with a spike in Covid-19 cases. On Friday, eight people died from complications linked to the disease, and there were 2,909 new infections.

At one stage, before the load was distributed among other public hospitals, all Covid-19 cases dispatched by Singapore Civil Defence Force ambulances would end up in TTSH.

"If there is one word I would use to describe the inflow of patients then, it would be relentless. It was like a tap which could not be switched off, it just kept dripping. There was no close valve," says the 44-year-old, who has been an ED nurse at the hospital for more than two decades.

He adds: "We've been pulling in double the shift times. Instead of eight or nine, our staff often put in up to 12 hours a day. On top of that, we have to be on call and ready to respond when the need arises," he says.

Although the situation is stressful, he is handling it with equanimity, having been involved in the outbreak management of diseases such as Sars, Ebola, Zika, H1N1 and Mers-CoV over the last 20 years of his career.

In fact, he was involved in setting up the Tan Tock Seng Hospital-National Centre for



Mr Soh putting on protective personal equipment (PPE) with the help of his wife, Ms Tina See, an infection prevention and control nurse. At work, he's mostly in his PPE and says "the hospital is cleaner than most other places". ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Infectious Diseases (TTSH-NCID) screening centre and getting it operational within 72 hours when it was designated ground zero for the fight against Covid-19 in early 2020.

For this and other contributions, he was conferred the President's Award For Nurses – the highest accolade in Singapore's nursing profession – earlier this year.

"I see myself as just a name to collect this. The true recognition and credit should go to the team. Without them, frankly, I don't think I could get this award," says Mr Soh, whose wife Tina is also a nurse at TTSH.

The irony of him bagging the award is also not lost on Mr Soh, who once went out of his way to give nursing a wide berth.

The elder of two children of a ship chandler and a clinic assistant, he grew up in Ang Mo Kio.

As both his parents worked, he was left in the care of babysitters between the ages of four and 12.

"When you are fostered out, especially to families with children of their own, you get the impression that you're a second-class citizen in the family because the good things always go to their own children," he says matter-of-factly.

Each time he changed nannies, he also changed schools.

"I changed primary schools three times," says the former pupil of Charlton Primary, Balestier Hill Primary and Lee Kuo Chuan Primary.

His grades suffered, and he almost had to repeat his Primary 6.

Those few years were unsettling, but Mr Soh reckons something good came out of the experience.

"Looking back now, it helped me develop a lot of resilience," he says. "I celebrated my 20th year in nursing recently, and a friend and I were talking about how I managed to find the energy and stamina to

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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MR CHRISTOPHER SOH, assistant director of nursing at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's emergency department, who is a big Star Wars fan.

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLE

If you look after the water, the water will look after the fish. If you treat and engage your staff well, they will look after their patients well.



MR SOH, on how he motivates his staff.

last so long in one of the busiest emergency departments in Singapore. I would attribute it to my resilience."

Life became more stable when he went back to live with his parents when he was 12.

Around this time, he started keeping fish as pets.

"I'm not sure if it's a manifestation of my past experiences of being fostered out. But I guess it's got to do with wanting to take really good care of something and letting it thrive," says Mr Soh, who as a teenager took on part-time jobs to feed his hobby.

The hobby is now a passion

which gives him pleasure and helps him forget the stress of work.

"I like monster fish; I even used to keep stingray. I like to see them in predatory mode, especially when you dump in the feed," he lets on with a grin.

He has about 20 aquariums at home, the largest of which is 1.7m by 0.8m. He even has one placed in the lift lobby outside his four-room flat in Hougang.

"I love animals. I wanted to become a vet, but my O-level results were not good," says Mr Soh, who completed his secondary education at Bowen Secondary.

He remembers having to list, in order of preference, 12 course choices while applying to study in a polytechnic.

He could think of only 11, among them paralegal studies, mass communications and chemical engineering.

"When I asked my mum if I could just submit 11, she scolded me. 'Why are you shortchanging yourself? Go and find another one!'"

He picked up a catalogue and the first page he flipped to was on nursing.

"I put that down as my last choice. I didn't want to look any more. I was thinking: 'Can't be so suay, right?'" he says, using the Hokkien word for unlucky.

As it turned out, fate had a wicked sense of humour.

Mr Soh did not make the cut for any of his choices except nursing.

Retaking his O levels was not something he wanted to do, so he accepted the offer.

"I told myself that the diploma could be a springboard to other careers," says Mr Soh, who obtained his nursing diploma from Nanyang Polytechnic in 1996.

While serving his national service, he actively explored other career options which led him to study part-time for an advanced diploma in strategic human

resource management.

As his nursing course was sponsored by the Ministry of Health, he served a bond with the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) running the ambulance service after leaving the army.

An incident that took place on his second day on the job was a game changer.

An old man had jumped from a block of flats in Toa Payoh and landed on the parapet on the first floor. Mr Soh, who responded to the call with a crew, was walking towards the body when he stepped on something sticky.

More experienced colleagues later told him he had stepped on the man's splattered brain matter.

The episode made a deep impression.

"If I could summarise the whole experience in one word, it's vulnerability – the vulnerability of the old man, and that of his family members," he says.

It struck him that nursing is meaningful because it's a profession which helps people when they are at their most vulnerable.

"Death is part of the cycle of life. It's a matter of time. But it is how we go. For those who choose the path of suicide, could we have done something for them to prevent it?"

He did two nursing stints – one with a maritime clinic, the other with a GP – before joining the emergency department at TTSH in 2001.

He has not looked back since.

Mr Soh was barely two years into his job when Sars hit.

The virus claimed the lives of more than 700 people worldwide, including 33 in Singapore.

He remembers the tentage the hospital built during the period.

"It was a normal canopy tentage.

We set up a cubicle and held patients inside but we had to water the tentage in the afternoon to evaporate the heat," he says of those early days.

It was his first exposure to a pandemic response, the first time he donned a PPE and the first time he lost colleagues on the front lines.

It was a time before Zoom and video calls, and those who succumbed to the disease died a very lonely death, he says.

Then newly married, he remembers moving out of his parents' home and roughing it out in his new flat which was then undergoing renovation.

"I remember thinking to myself: 'I chose this job and I cannot blame anyone if I get the infection. But if I bring home the infection, that is a different story. If my family were to get infected, and somehow something happened to them, then it would be on me for my whole life. I could never live with it.'"

Things have come a long way since then. He rose through the ranks and was made assistant director of nursing in 2017.

By the time Covid-19 started making headlines at the end of 2019, Mr Soh – who obtained a Bachelor of Science (Nursing) with Distinction from Curtin University of Technology in 2011 – and other healthcare workers from TTSH and NCID were battle-ready.

Together with a team of ED colleagues used to working under pressure and managing crises, they set up, in just three days, a 24-hour screening centre capable of testing hundreds of patients daily.

The big Star Wars fan says the feat was possible because of collective leadership.

"I'm a big believer in The Force. You can move mountains with collective leadership."

The fierce battle with Covid-19 is still ongoing.

He has, he says, no time to feel daunted. In a situation where demand for care exceeds resources, first-line defenders like him are only preoccupied with solutions to one question: "What would we do if capacity is breached?"

The father of two children, aged 12 and 15, shakes his head when asked if he worries about getting infected.

At work, he's in his PPE most of the time, he says.

"I think the hospital is cleaner than most other places, including my home," he says. "I have never cleaned so much in the hospital. Every time a patient gets out of the chair, we have to clean. Sit down, also need to clean."

As assistant nursing director, his duties run the gamut from strategic planning and innovation development to staff welfare and training.

Asked how he motivates his staff, the keen aquarist says: "If you look after the water, the water will look after the fish."

"If you treat and engage your staff well, they will look after their patients well."

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