

# the new paper

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Public needs to take every precaution in current dangerous Covid-19 situation

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Lions' coach aims to stifle at least one big gun in World Cup Qualifier group

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# Discrimination of staff due to virus fears: TTSH chief nurse

Dr Hoi believes information is the key to ending such ugly behaviour among some members of the public

NADINE CHUA

Along with the rest of her colleagues, she has been on the front line battling the Covid-19 virus for more than a year, caring for patients at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) as infection numbers picked up and then working through a grim surge as the nation went into a lockdown from April 7 to June 1 last year.

Over the last few weeks, Dr Hoi Shu Yin, chief nurse at TTSH, has experienced that same sort of intensity at work, as a cluster of infections emerged at the hospital, forcing it into a lockdown with visitors barred from entry from April 29.

What followed shocked many – stories were shared on social media of TTSH staff being shunned by some members of the public over fears of possible infection.

Remarkably, Dr Hoi, who has been a nurse at TTSH for 20 years and is married with three children, is sanguine over the issue.

Speaking to The New Paper recently, the 43-year-old said: "Members of the public have their concerns, which is completely understandable. But I believe that as they get better informed, their fears will be eased."

"PM Lee has also denounced such acts of discrimination, which really puts forward the tone for the nation."

In a Facebook post last Friday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed his disappointment at those who discriminated against TTSH staff.

"People are understandably fearful, but it is no less distressing to see," he said.

"For a year plus, all of us have been fighting Covid-19 in one way or another, and because we all worked together, our situation has steadily improved."

"We cannot let setbacks divide us or wear us down because



(Above) Dr Hoi Shu Yin. (Right) TTSH staff reading the encouragement boards. PHOTOS: TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL



if we lose our unity, the virus has won."

One nurse said on Twitter that some drivers from ride-hailing services had cancelled her bookings once they realised her destination was TTSH.

Another nurse said she noticed people keeping their distance when she was on the MRT in her uniform.

Mr Gan Kim Yong, who was Health Minister at the time, said in Parliament last Tuesday that such discriminatory incidents are part of a "very worrisome trend".

"We observed some minority of resident Singaporeans taking steps to protect themselves at the expense of our healthcare workers' well-being."

"Some of them have been asked to move out of their homes by their landlords, some of their co-workers are shunning them. I think these are wrong," said Mr Gan, who relinquished his Health Ministry portfolio on Saturday and is now Minister for Trade and Industry.

Adjunct Associate Professor Habeebul Rahman, chairman of the well-being committee at TTSH, believes such discriminatory feelings do not represent what the majority of Singaporeans feel.

"Acts of discrimination could arise when an individual

is apprehensive or afraid for his safety. But it is important to note that most people actually show a lot of support for healthcare workers, and we could not be more grateful for that," said Prof Habeebul, 47.

One TTSH nurse claimed that Hotel G turned down a booking for a room to prevent a "possible risk" to other hotel guests.

Responding to TNP queries, a spokesman for the hotel said this occurred because inaccurate information of the hotel's booking policy was disseminated.

"Following this isolated case, the hotel sincerely apologises for the mishandling of this guest communication and has already contacted the guest... to clarify the matter," the spokesman said.

"Furthermore, associates are undergoing thorough retraining to prevent such miscommunication from happening again."

"We strongly appreciate the efforts of all healthcare and front-line staff, as well as the community at large, in these unprecedented times. Please be rest assured that Hotel G welcomes every guest and there has never been any discrimination," the spokesman added.

To date, 46 people linked to TTSH have been infected, in-

cluding staff, patients and their close contacts. Mr Gan said close to 28,000 people have been tested in the effort to detect cases linked to the TTSH cluster, which is still active.

When asked if the spike in cases dampened the spirits of TTSH staff, Prof Habeebul said: "It is not surprising that morale would be affected, but there is also a sense of coming together during these tough times."

"We often remind each other not to give in to negative sentiment but continue with the work we are supposed to do."

Mr Dominic Tung, 53, assistant director of human resource wellness at TTSH, told TNP that an enhanced staff well-being programme and initiatives were rapidly rolled out to support their mental and emotional health.

A patient, who wanted to be known only as Ms Wong, had already been hospitalised at TTSH for two months after a surgery, but had stayed on in the hospital as part of containment measures during the recent spike in cases.

## PRAISE

Ms Wong, who is in her early 40s, was full of praise for the TTSH staff.

She said: "I was heartened by the doctors and nurses who have been keeping tabs on me and made sure that they understood my emotional needs."

Dr Hoi, who embarked on a long-distance doctorate programme in nursing practice at Duke University's School of Nursing, received her doctorate in 2018.

She is grateful for all that TTSH has done for the staff in these tough times.

"Even though it is a trying period for everyone, I really appreciate the initiatives put out by TTSH. It is nice to see all hands on deck helping one another."

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