

S'PORE NEEDS MORE NURSES

Today is Nurses' Day, and these front-liners form the largest group of healthcare workers here. But healthcare providers say they need more of them, especially while fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and with an ageing population. The Sunday Times looks at what is being done to recruit more nurses and why some left their previous jobs to become nurses.

Shabana Begum

Although they make up the largest professional group of healthcare workers here, Singapore still does not have enough nurses.

As at the end of last year, there were more than 42,000 nurses registered with the Singapore Nursing Board.

And as at 2019, there were about 5,500 nurses not in active practice. Nursing jobs were the hardest PMET (professional, managerial, executive and technical) positions to fill, according to the Ministry of Manpower's 2020 report on job vacancies. These jobs made up the biggest number of vacancies unfilled for at least six months last year.

Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) chief nurse Ng Gaik Nai said that with an ageing population, complex disease and advanced demand for care management, there is a demand for more nurses.

She said: "Nurses are also needed at the community level to educate residents on staying healthy... and to ultimately reduce the number of readmission cases."

She said that with upcoming facilities on the SGH campus, such as a new emergency medicine building and elective care centre, more nurses will be needed to fill roles there.

Nurse retention is also a concern, said Healthcare Services Employees' Union president K. Thanaletchimi.

The former Nominated MP said: "Due to the long working hours and the heavy demands of healthcare professionals... many of them leave the profession as they feel mentally burnt out, or are no longer able to cope with both work and personal commitments."

And with the Philippines recently suspending permits for nurses who want to work abroad, the shortage could worsen. Foreign nurses make up about one-third of the overall nursing workforce in Singapore.

Thomson Medical's director of nursing, Ms Siti Hossier, said that recruiting nurses into the private sector has always been competitive. But the pandemic has made it more challenging as more nurses are joining vaccination and swab operations.

Private healthcare group IHH Healthcare Singapore says that half of its nursing workforce is made up of foreign nurses. The healthcare group's director of nursing, Mrs Josephine Ong, said: "The pandemic has added further strain to the manpower shortage as our nurses were redeployed to help set up quarantine and community care facilities, vaccination and swabbing operations."

The group operates four hospitals here, including Mount Elizabeth Hospital. To help ease its nurses' workload, some paper-work and non-clinical tasks were handed over to other departments. Similarly, at Farrer Park Hospital, screening duties and health

declaration processes are handled by other employees so that the nurses can focus on caring for patients and do clinical work.

Since January, the IHH Singapore hospitals have hired more healthcare assistants, and next year, new patient care associate jobs will be created to support nurses.

Ms Ong said that there are plans to use robotics and artificial intelligence to assist nurses with some clinical tasks.

"Working longer shifts is not the solution to cope with a shortage of nurses as they need adequate rest to do their best for patients," she emphasised. When Mr Hari Shoran Silvarajoo, 34, was a Singapore Airlines flight attendant seven years ago, an elderly man fainted during a flight to Europe. He did not know what to do then, but thankfully, a doctor was on board.

Mr Hari said: "I had the knowledge based on my basic first-aid training in SIA, but I did not have the confidence to actually attend to the man."

Mr Hari later enrolled in a nursing course at an Australian university. He has been a nurse with Woodlands Health for more than five years now, and is attached to Sengkang General Hospital's emergency department. He said: "Time is crucial in the emergency department. Decisions have to

REWARDING WORK

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MR HARI SHORAN SILVARAJOO (below), a nurse with Woodlands Health who is attached to Sengkang General Hospital's emergency department.



ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

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Like Mr Hari, some nurses joined the healthcare sector as mid-career professionals. Most others joined after graduating from nursing courses in universities, polytechnics or the Institute of Technical Education.

Over the years, Singapore has been promoting nursing and trying to retain nurses through campaigns, recognition and awards, salary adjustments, scholarships and education opportunities.

The Government announced salary hikes of 5 per cent to 14 per cent for nurses from last month.

Ms Thanaletchimi said: "While the salaries of nurses in Singapore have increased considerably over the years, they are not as competitive as the salaries in some developed countries, especially for entry-level nurses. It is gratifying that the median starting salary for a degree-holding registered nurse is about \$3,500.

Associate Professor Elaine Siow from the nursing programme at the Singapore Institute of Technology said the pay hike could make nursing more comparable to other professions here, and help improve staff retention.

Singapore also aims to have up to 700 advanced practice nurses (APNs) who can prescribe medication for patients by 2030.

As at May, just 57 of 294 of such highly skilled nurses had prescribing rights.

APNs are senior nurses who typically have a master's degree and can take on greater roles in diagnosis and treatment. Ms Ng said SGH is identifying and training suitable nurses to become APNs, as the hospital needs more of them to provide clinical supervision in wards.

Last year, the National Nursing Academy was set up to help nurses further their knowledge and skills through courses and training.

Ms Bella Tan, Nanyang Polytechnic's programme director for nursing, said that nearly 500 nurse specialists are trained in the polytechnic's advanced and specialist diploma programmes each year.

A 2020 paper about the challenges of nursing in Singapore, published in the Asia-Pacific Journal of Oncology Nursing, stated that institutions' and the Government's attempts to improve the nursing

shortage over the years had met with limited success.

But existing programmes have helped to attract aspiring nurses.

Workforce Singapore's (WSG) nursing-related professional conversion programmes have attracted more than 1,500 mid-career local workers since 2003.

Mr Timothy Merrill Goh, 31, who is pursuing a diploma at Nanyang Polytechnic to become a registered nurse under one of these professional conversion programmes, aspires to be an APN some day.

He worked in the events industry for three years, but the pandemic affected the sector badly.

After completing his studies, Mr Goh will be a nurse at the National University Hospital (NUH).

He said: "During my clinical attachment at NUH, it was heartening to see patients getting discharged. Sometimes I would also receive a small word of thanks from them, which made me feel appreciated and certain I had made the right career choice."

In 2019 and last year, about 4,400 students in total enrolled in nursing courses at various institutes of higher learning, said the Ministry of Education.

Covid-19 has helped to raise the profile of nurses by highlighting their work as front-liners and healthcare heroes.

This has translated to a rise in interest in the profession. WSG said there was about a 70 per cent increase in placements for the nursing professional conversion programmes last year, compared with the 2019 numbers. And this year, there was nearly a 50 per cent rise in applications for the programmes, compared with last year.

Professor Emily Ang, head of the National University of Singapore's Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies, said the school received more than 1,100 applications for its undergraduate nursing programme this year, up from more than 800 applications last year.

She said: "Among the applicants, there are many who chose nursing over medicine and more prestigious courses, even though their results qualify for those programmes."

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Additional reporting by Fang Yiyang

Nursing was 9th choice, but it turned out to be her calling

Fang Yiyang

On the first day of her first hospital attachment almost 30 years ago, Ms Margaret Lee, then a nursing student, was sent to the emergency department – as a patient.

She had fainted along the hospital corridor, overwhelmed by the sight and smell of a patient's diabetic foot ulcer.

Now chief nurse at Alexandra Hospital, Ms Lee, 45, recalled how many of her peers had expected her to quit and thought she would never make it as a nurse.

Not only did she stay on, but on July 14, she was one of seven nurses who received the President's Award for Nurses from President Halimah Yacob at a virtual ceremony. It is Singapore's highest accolade for the profession.

Now the mother of three children – aged 11, 14 and 16 – Ms Lee had not even planned on becoming a nurse. She had wanted to take up graphic design at Temasek Polytechnic, but did not score enough points in her O levels to get into the course.

She was accepted for the Diploma in Nursing at Nanyang Polytechnic, which she had applied for as her ninth choice. She said: "My mind went blank when I saw the results of my course application. I knew nursing was a tough job because that was what all the adults told me at the time. I had no idea of the job scope or what exactly nurses did."

But for Ms Lee, the setbacks motivated her to work harder. She said: "After I fainted in the hospital, it actually strengthened my resolve to finish the course as a personal challenge. And since I had already done poorly for my O levels, I did not want to mess up my diploma too."

She came to realise nursing was her calling. "Over time, many encounters added up to help me see the value of the work I did, and how privileged I am to be in a position to do something for others," she said. One of her most poignant moments came about five years into the job, when she was taking care of a liver transplant patient.

Said Ms Lee: "He came from a financially disadvantaged background, so I was delighted when we found a suitable donor for him. When something good happens to your patients, especially if it is life-changing, you just feel extra happy for them."

Her job as chief nurse – a position she has held since May 2019 – involves more administrative responsibilities, like coordinating with other departments and healthcare staff throughout the hospital, in addition to guiding younger nurses.

Direct patient contact is not required of her now, which is something she misses. So she sometimes visits the clinical area to observe nurses interacting with patients. "I do this to remind myself why I'm doing what I'm doing," she said.

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A PRIVILEGE TO SERVE

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MS MARGARET LEE (below), chief nurse at Alexandra Hospital.



ST FILE PHOTO



Ms Prema Harrison attending to a patient. She also worked during the Sars epidemic in 2003 and the H1N1 crisis in 2009. PHOTO: TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

Nurse manager who's worked during Sars, H1N1 takes Covid-19 in her stride

Ms Prema Harrison, unit nurse manager of wards in level nine at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), went through the Sars epidemic in 2003 and the H1N1 crisis in 2009.

In April, TTSH was identified as a Covid-19 cluster with 48 cases linked to it. Ms Prema, 44, her colleagues and the nurses under her charge were served quarantine orders. They worked on the same floor of ward 9D, ground zero of the cluster.

Said Ms Prema: "We understood the need to be quarantined, and we were just waiting at home for the calls to convey us to the quarantine hotels."

But the most nerve-racking period was when the nurses had to isolate themselves at home and wait for the ambulance, which would ferry them to the quarantine facilities.

She said: "We didn't know what time the ambulance would come. For some of us, it came within hours, and for others, it came a few days later."

"We were all waiting with our bags, we'd changed our clothes, and at night, we didn't know whether to bathe and go to sleep, or continue waiting."

Before being quarantined, the nurses were placed on a leave of absence.

Some with children sent their kids to live with their grandparents during the period, said Ms Prema, who lives alone.

UNCERTAIN WAIT

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MS PREMA HARRISON, unit nurse manager of wards in level nine at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, on waiting to be taken to be quarantined.

The 14-day quarantine also coincided with Mother's Day and Hari Raya Aidilfitri, which was painful for some nurses in isolation.

Ms Prema said: "During our daily Zoom session on Mother's Day, we could see the mothers tearing up, and it was very sad."

To cope with isolation and loneliness during quarantine, the nurses had Zoom chats twice a day, alongside virtual yoga and zumba sessions.

When the nurses returned to work in May, they were greeted with a "Welcome home level 9" banner, and one of the hospital's deputy directors of nursing gave them red eggs, symbolising luck.

When asked if the pandemic was the most challenging period in her more than 20-year career, Ms Prema said she is taking it in her stride. "When you join nursing, you are there to take care of patients, regardless of the situation and the circumstances."

"Covid-19 has given us the opportunity to answer the nation's call to care for those who need it, despite whatever fears and uncertainties that lie ahead," she said. Shabana Begum

NUHS Regional Health System staff (both in blue) – assistant director of nursing Sam Pei Fen (left) and dietician Tan Kim Fong – sharing with elderly patients about food and health, at a community health post in NTUC Health's Senior Activity Centre of Taman Jurong. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HEALTH SYSTEM REGIONAL HEALTH SYSTEM



Acute need for help in long-term care and community hospitals

As Singaporeans live longer and the rate of chronic diseases increases, the country will need more nurses who can attend to patients at home and in neighbourhoods.

That's where community nurses come in. They provide home care services to the elderly, are deployed at nursing posts in neighbourhoods and work in community hospitals and nursing homes. According to a 2020 paper about

the challenges of nursing in Singapore, published in the Asia-Pacific Journal of Oncology Nursing, the nursing shortage here is especially felt in community hospitals and long-term care facilities.

It was written by Ms Chua Gek Phin, who in 2013, as the director of nursing from the National Cancer Centre Singapore, had received the President's Award for Nurses.

Dr Catherine Koh, head of community nursing at the NUHS Re-

gional Health System Office, said: "There is definitely a growing demand (for community nurses), but stating a number may be arbitrary now as the community nursing model is still evolving rapidly with a shift to population health."

She said the regional health system has 35 community nurses who have attended to over 7,000 patients over the past year – either in their homes or at health posts in neighbourhoods, alongside other

healthcare professionals.

Ren Ci Hospital chief nurse Jenny Sim said fewer nurses, including younger ones, are opting to enter community nursing because it may seem less challenging and exciting than working in a fast-paced hospital environment.

Healthcare Services Employees' Union president K. Thanaletchimi said: "The salaries of nurses in the intermediate and long-term care sector largely run by voluntary welfare organisations are still comparatively lower than in the public healthcare sector."

"There is an apparent shortage in the number of locals joining the community care organisations, and institutions work with lean manpower."

It was announced in Parliament last year that the Government will

set aside \$150 million over the next three years to boost the salaries of community nurses.

Then Senior Minister of State for Health Amy Khor had said then that, after three years, the Health Ministry will factor in the higher salary levels in its funding to community care providers.

Mr Ardi S. Hardjoe, chief executive of Theye Hua Kwan Nursing Home, said Ang Mo Kio-Thye Hua Kwan Hospital has a 30 per cent shortfall in nurses.

Dr Koh said more than half of the community nurses within the NUHS Regional Health System

came from hospitals. SingHealth's group chief nurse Tracy Carol Ayre said the number of community nurses in SingHealth has grown from two in 2006 to 120 this year. SingHealth plans to expand its community nursing scope to provide care in the community to mothers with young children and residents undergoing palliative care in the community.

Community Nursing Scholarship holder Kevin Cheong, 23, developed a soft spot for the elderly when he volunteered to deliver food to elderly residents during his polytechnic years.

He said: "I was struck by how happy and excited the elderly were when they received their meals. The brief interactions with them were very heartening."

Shabana Begum



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