

A Ray of Hope

Editor's note:

Doctors across the country have soldiered on amid the many changes the pandemic has brought on. It comes as no surprise that some of these changes had to be implemented almost overnight, and often on a large scale. We continue to hear from doctors who stepped out of their usual work routines to answer the nation's call against COVID-19, and we thank them for their contributions.

It all started with a mild throat irritation that did not go away. Within a day, I started developing a cough, and a fever of 38.1 degrees Celsius came on. Even then, I told myself that it was probably just a normal flu. I remember clearly when the laboratory staff called saying: "Alvin, I have bad news. Pack your bags, your COVID-19 swab came back positive." My mind instantly went blank and all I could respond was, "What the heck?"

Instinctively I shut my room door, yelled to my mother of my diagnosis and told her to stay away from me. I could hear her burst into tears in the adjacent room. Honestly, the only thought that kept running through my mind was, "Did I pass the infection to my mother, or any of my friends and family members?" I was filled with disappointment and anger at myself for putting my loved ones at risk – how could I ever forgive myself if someone else got the infection because of me?

Things moved really fast and I was soon packed off to the hospital via the dedicated ambulance service. Who would have known that that was the last time I saw my family before my 61-day long hospitalisation, isolated from the outside world?

During my hospitalisation in the National Centre for Infectious Diseases and Mount Alvernia Hospital (MAH), I remembered waking up, only to find myself living the exact same day as the previous day and expecting the next day to be exactly the same. I went through so many nasopharyngeal swabs; each swab getting my hopes up for the day, only to be disappointed when the results came back positive yet again. Thankfully, my family and friends who were exposed to me were all well.

I felt like I had completely lost the control that I had over my life. The ward nurses, one of the few human interactions that I had, became a pillar of support during my hospitalisation. They constantly reminded me that patience is the ability to keep a positive attitude while waiting, and to give myself a little bit more time, have a little bit more faith and hope, and things will eventually fall into place. Here is a shout-out to all the nurses who, despite being on the front line, still maintained such positive attitudes to care for their patients.



After a few weeks, I became the longest stayer in MAH. I started having new roommates quite often – migrant workers from Bangladesh, India and China who came and left because they recovered faster. I played the role of "orientation officer", orientating them to the ward and helping them settle into this new environment as they rode out their infection. The migrant workers took a while to open up to me but we started having conversations about their life stories, aspirations, political views, and their dreams for the future. Those moments were really precious because it felt like it was "us against the infection/world". They told me that they were very thankful to have a doctor as their roommate, because it made them feel safer. What they didn't know is that I am even more humbled to have met each one of them, honoured to have the privilege to hear their untold life stories, and for their companionship during my hospitalisation.

With the revision in the COVID-19 discharge criteria, I was eventually discharged after 61 days of isolation despite being swab positive. I look back at my experience fondly, because it taught me the value of life and time, and to make the best out of it while it lasts. Never take for granted your loved ones, your friends, as well as all the little moments that make life so much more precious. Life is short, and we can all afford to be a little kinder, and offer strangers and those around us the same kindness we offer to those we love. I am still in contact with each of my roommates, checking on them as they continue to serve out the quarantine while waiting for the COVID-19 situation in the dormitories to settle down. I hope they continue to stay safe, and I look forward to meeting them for a meal to catch up, once circuit breaker ends.

Dr Alvin Tan, Preventive Medicine Resident, Communicable Diseases Division, Ministry of Health

COVID-19 came like a raid in the night. Quiet and stealthy with catastrophic effects. Overnight, our airports, economy, schools and roads came to a standstill and our healthcare system was placed under the ultimate test as everyone raced against time to contain the spread and death toll of COVID-19.

Initially fearful and apprehensive to be sent to the front line at Singapore's first community isolation facility, I am now grateful that I had the opportunity to get to know these foreign workers on a personal level.

I confess and am ashamed to admit the ignorant racism that I harboured toward these individuals. The thoughts of possible violence and unhygienic individuals that I would have to face were dispelled as I worked with them daily along their road to recovery.

Mr MH is a patient that will always stay close to my heart. He was my last patient on a 12-hour shift. I was sweating under my personal protective equipment, mask fogging up and my back aching. I asked him where he came from.

"Ng Teng Fong Hospital, doctor."

"How was it?" I asked.

"They are doing such an excellent job, I can see how busy they are, but they still take such good care of me. How can I ask for more?"

He went on to tell me he had gone on *The Online Citizen* to write some feedback praising the healthcare workers for their efforts and hard work. Mr MH ended off thanking our Government: "This Government is so good, they even take care of me, I am so grateful."

For a moment, I stopped typing and looked at him. For the first time in a long, long time, I remembered why I became a doctor. These individuals empathised with hard work; they knew the value of gratitude. His words lightened the weight of the long shift, and his gratitude made the backache and fatigue worthwhile.

Mr MH is not an anomaly. These foreign workers have taught me many lessons – humility, gratitude, patience and adaptability. They have been the blood and sweat behind every high rise building we now proudly call our Central Business District, the muscle behind what we now call our homes. Largely invisible to our society, always working, always taking instruction and hardly recognised.

During this pandemic, they have been moved (for their safety) from their homes to hospitals, to community isolation facilities, to factory-converted dormitories and so on. Most speak little to no English and do not understand what is going on. Many fear worrying their families back home and have not told them that they are ill. I can only imagine how frightened and lonely they must feel in a foreign land, sick and without financial or emotional support.

Dr Estelle Tan

We started SMILE! Singapore Project on 21 April 2020 to prepare a table for these foreign workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Food transcends race, religion and culture. Our goal is to provide them with quality food items that we hope will bring joy and comfort to them in a time like this.

With me are Eunice Lee, Florence Chen and Alice Yeh. We come from all walks of life and I am amazed at how quickly we learnt to work together toward a common goal of putting a SMILE on many faces. As of 21 June, two months on, together with the unprecedented support from our donors and supporters, we have reached out to more than 20,000 patients and 1,000 individuals across Singapore.

To support this exponential growth of SMILE! Singapore Project, I (a physician) had to learn about warehouses, containers, lorries, pellets and forklifts. Not to mention the shelf life of the different breads and buns, the weight of each carton of Milo, coffee and cereal... the list grows every day. It has been a whirlwind, and a trying and exciting journey.

I started the Project with nothing more than a five-hour plan and am in awe of where we are now. I am a Christian, and I thank God for the abundant provision and protection.

As Mr Tan Chuan Jin, Speaker of Parliament, said in response to SMILE! Singapore Project's efforts, "Great to see you folks out and about trying to make a difference. Every bit counts. When more Singaporeans do so. Society will change."

I am heartened to have seen and applaud the thousands of brave and courageous volunteers, nurses and fellow doctors who have joined the front line at the community isolation facilities, dormitories, hospitals, community recovery facilities and so on. There is still much to be done to get Singapore back on its feet again. I invite you, who are reading this, to step up and step forward to the front line with us, to make a difference during this pivotal moment in Singapore's history. Every bit of effort counts to a better tomorrow for Singapore and the world.

To find out more, or to join our crew, visit <https://bit.ly/SMILESingaporeProject>. ♦

