

STRENGTH IN UNITY

The Ups and Downs of COVID-19

Editor's note:

This spread came about because in the frenzy that has become our new "BAU"*, many of us barely had the chance to process all that's been happening. Each day brings new changes that we are required to frantically keep pace with, forcing a kind of hypervigilance on our already overstretched minds. *SMA News* invited doctors to share their perspective of how COVID-19 has affected them on a professional and personal level. Over the next few issues, we will feature people of different seniorities, with varying levels of "frontline" duties and healthcare settings. We have not been able to give a voice to everyone – there were some who simply didn't have the bandwidth during this time. We hope that in the future, we will hear from them. #SGUnited

I was studying in Beijing during the SARS outbreak in 2003. The school campus was closed to prevent virus transmission, but I somehow managed to sneak out to buy my first computer. Guess I was too bored and young at that time.

Things are very different now in 2020 as we face COVID-19, because computers can help solve almost every problem, except how to keep my two young kids engaged. It is a disaster for them, and also for me somewhat, that there are no more bouncy castles, overseas travels and friend gatherings. But at the same time, we found out that we could collect seashells along East Coast Park and a family of otters lives in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. We also finally decorated the playroom wall as per what we had planned for a long time ago. We have since learnt that life can be appreciated in many different ways.

I work as a psychiatrist in the Institute of Mental Health and I often experience mixed feelings when I hear of my friends being posted to the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID). On one hand, I feel proud of them for sacrificing themselves to safeguard the country, but on the other hand, I worry for their safety. Everyone can be a hero during these difficult times. As for me, the best way to contribute is to carry on my duty to help my patients.

Dr Zhao Zhenru, Institute of Mental Health

It has been heart-warming to see how quickly people at every level have stepped up to face this new challenge. As the severity of the situation dawned on us, junior doctors volunteered to staff the newly created isolation and pneumonia wards, while others stepped in to take up more calls and clinics to cover their duties. Senior doctors hustled from one meeting to another, all too often forgoing meals. Nursing colleagues redeployed from surgical wards quickly got to grips with the workflows and processes to ensure that screening swabs were sent off to the National Public Health Laboratory at the right times.

Buried beneath the surface of our response was a tacit, steely determination that we would put our best foot forward despite not knowing what lay ahead. Calmness and courage came from the knowledge that we had survived SARS, that we have learnt from that experience and we are better prepared this time around. In the midst of adversity, we were united and purposeful.

My doctoring friends from other countries have been asking me how Singapore has managed to keep COVID-19 cases relatively under control. We can hold our head high that Singapore has fared admirably when compared to other countries, even when faced with the same "examination" of our healthcare system. There's more work to be done, but we can take heart in what we have achieved thus far!

Dr Paul Tern, Singapore General Hospital

During these difficult times, it is not only the doctors but our frontline workers who willingly rose to the occasion. The patient service associates, nurses and healthcare assistants are all crucial components of the team and are often more exposed than us doctors. I learnt that communicating and engaging everyone is of utmost importance. People need to understand what they are dealing with and have their questions answered. When they know that they are protected and have their best interests taken care of, people will always give their best. This is not only important within the organisation but extends to the intermediate and long term care sectors and partners that we work with as well.

I have also realised that a quick and precise means to communicate changes and instruction is crucial in ensuring that everyone is aligned on, rather than each with their own interpretation of, the situation. Even more important is to communicate intent so that people will understand why things are changing quickly and can agree to adapt to the changes. This then allows feedback and loop closures when things cannot be done, and quick adjustments can be made.

Together we can move faster and be stronger.

A/Prof Ong Biauwei Chi, Anaesthesiology, Sengkang General Hospital



I haven't had dinner with my parents in weeks and I won't for weeks more to come.

Today, I stopped by to drop off their chronic medications. We talked two metres away from each other in masks; in that awkward, halting language in which adult children try to tell their conservative Asian parents "I love you" without quite saying it.

My mum, as usual, tried to foist food on me. This iteration would be a plate of dumplings. I really wasn't hungry and I thought about saying no, but we're Singaporean, and to us food is love. And you don't say no to love, or dumplings.

I asked her to leave the plate on the floor, and after she had closed the door, picked it up and ate it. I will return her the plate after.

After.

Yes, there will be an after. This too shall pass.

Dr Alex Wong, Private Practitioner



It's no easy task wrenching surgeons out from their comfortable operating theatres and clinics and sending them to the NCID Screening Centre. The first batch of warriors were mostly medical officers, but the second batch sent in mid-February included associate consultants and consultants who had not stepped out of our department for years. Adding to the chaos of the varying ages and experience of medical staff is that everyone looks the same in personal protective equipment! *Spot the old man among the two young ladies in the picture.*

We used colour coded tags (for doctors/nurses/radiographers/etc) and wrote our names in large print with marker (or small text to avoid being called!).

One good part of the whole experience though was the camaraderie – since everyone from security to surgical consultant wears the same outfit, eats together and works together, many of us have made new friends (with appropriate social distancing of course!). One batch was even rumoured to have gone for a run together after night shift, although this author cannot verify this. ♦

Dr Sunder Balasubramaniam, General Surgery, Tan Tock Seng Hospital



*BAU stands for business as usual