

SERVING IN A Foreign Land

Image: Hendry Poh

Text and photos by Dr Nurul Ain Binti Ibrahim

It was 16 March 2020 when Malaysia announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) to contain the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic from spreading, and that it would take effect in two days. I was on my annual leave in my home country during that historical point in time.

Not long afterwards, I received a text message from my boss informing me that I had to leave immediately and cancel my annual leave if I wanted to return to Singapore, as the borders would be closed soon. Things were in disarray at that time; my mum was unable to look after my kids and my husband was still at work, so I could not just leave. Instead, I extended my annual leave and stayed on in Johor Bahru.



I used to travel back and forth from Johor Bahru to my workplace in Singapore daily, and had gotten used to the jam and heavy traffic. The longest time I was trapped in a traffic jam was nine hours – on a Friday before the Lunar New Year break. However, since last December I decided to bring my family to stay with me in Singapore and we returned to Johor Bahru during my off days. That was my routine before this pandemic and I had to come up with new plans when the MCO started.

A few days later, it was Singapore's turn to announce its circuit breaker. The national border shutdown at the time was pivotal as the number of COVID-19 cases was spiking. To get back to Singapore, my employer had



to get my entry approval from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), as only essential workers were allowed to enter Singapore at that time. I could not bring my family with me in view of Malaysia's MCO, and it was better to be separated from my kids as I was worried about exposing them to the risk of getting COVID-19 from me.

Staying true to my oath

Once my application to enter Singapore was approved by MOM, I began my unforgettable journey back. For the first time in history, the Johor-Singapore Causeway, which usually sees about 300,000 Malaysian workers going back and forth every day, was empty.

I met a Malaysian immigration officer on duty that day and showed him the documents required for my entry into Singapore. He said, "Okay, doctor, you may enter." He added: "But you have to be prepared for the possibility of not being able to come back to Malaysia until December 2020."

At that moment, my heart broke. I thought about my kids and family in Malaysia, but I knew there was no other option. When I graduated as a doctor, I had promised and declared my commitment to assume the responsibilities and obligations of the

medical profession by caring for the sick. My family reassured me that I didn't have to worry. My Singaporean friends and relatives sent me lots of messages asking if I was doing okay and even offered to buy groceries for me if I was too busy at work.

However, shouldering that responsibility was definitely not an easy task. Once I arrived in Singapore, I was served a Stay-Home Notice and sent to a designated facility to be quarantined for two weeks before I could start working.

Following the quarantine, I was deployed to a Community Care Facility (my original placement is with the Institute of Mental Health), where I was to treat mild COVID-19 cases. On my first day of work, I did a mask and personal protective equipment (PPE) fitting, and was taught how to properly wear (donning) and safely take off (doffing) the PPE. And the next day, I officially started my duty as a healthcare professional in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore. Thanks to the protective layers of the PPE, the risk of getting a COVID-19 infection from patients is low.

Apart but still connected

Then came the fasting month and soon after, Hari Raya Aidilfitri. It was the first time I was celebrating without my family. Despite being away from them, I still wanted to mark the occasion, so I made dishes like chicken rendang, satay and



kuah kacang (peanut sauce) with my housemate, wore the Hari Raya clothes that I had bought earlier, took photos and made a video call to my family in Malaysia.

While I could not be with them during this special day, I was also grateful to have a strong support system in Singapore: relatives, close friends and kind bosses who made it possible for me to keep working with peace of mind. At first, it was hard to imagine having to cope with the separation for an unknown period, to not be able to hold and hug my kids in the midst of the pervading fear and anxiety that we're all dealing with. But my parents and husband understood that and they sent me videos and photos of my children and updates on a daily basis without fail. Whenever I have time after work, I will video call them.

While I was yearning to be with my family – my two-year-old daughter just started to learn how to say "mommy" last month – I told myself that nothing bad would happen to them while I was away from them doing my job to the best of my ability. I know this is a very difficult time for everyone and it's okay to not feel okay. It helps a lot when we can focus on what is within our control. I am trying to reset my expectations and identify what I can do rather than focus on what I cannot do. We are all adapting to the new normal and routine, and making sacrifices, but we are all in this together and soon we will win this war. ♦

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