

COVID-19: Leading the Good Fight

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Photos by Gov.sg, MINDEF, Changi General Hospital, National Healthcare Group, National University Health System, Sengkang Community Hospital and Singapore General Hospital

FEATURE



The text is concise but clear – the case tally for the day, followed by a breakdown according to the source of infection, and a rare instance when a nil return is greatly welcomed. This clear and factual text is an embodiment of Singapore's strategy in fighting the menace of COVID-19, an effort which has been led by the Ministry of Health (MOH).

One of the first countries outside of China to have been hit, Singapore has been imperilled by this contagion since end-January 2020. There was much anxiety early on, but MOH's efforts to ensure clear lines of communication to healthcare professionals and to the broader public ensured that accurate information was made readily available, and fake news and hyperbole were kept at bay. The escalation of the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition to Orange in February, after community spread was detected, was in step with measures to channel more resources into the fight to contain the virus' spread and to allow for greater protection of vulnerable groups.

Simultaneously, testing capabilities were ramped up. Certain Public Health Preparedness Clinics and GPs allowed for testing of those with acute

respiratory symptoms under the Swab and Send Home scheme. This readily accessible and aggressive testing strategy allowed for cases to be picked up and isolated, and thus mitigated viral spread. MOH's intensive contact tracing policy also won it many global plaudits. As February turned to March, Singapore seemed to have turned the corner in its pandemic fight.

However, COVID-19 is an insidious thing, and before long, the virus began spreading within densely populated foreign worker dormitories. With hundreds of cases being charted each day, it was a truly trying time for the country. What followed next was an impressive coordinated effort to stem the spread of the virus – by having even more aggressive testing, sequestering those who had been exposed or who tested positive, treating the ill in secure facilities, and introducing whole-country efforts to check any viral spread. There was also a requisitioning of public facilities and healthcare staff to manage the thousands who were ill. With these intensive efforts, culminating in the two-month long circuit breaker, Singapore was able to bring the virus under control.

Perhaps the greatest testament to MOH's efforts in fighting COVID-19 is where Singapore is now. The battle is far from over, but as it stands, our case numbers are low, and community spread is minimal. We are now on the cusp of a national vaccination programme, with vaccinations slated to be provided to all Singaporeans free of charge. While many societies have spoken of virus containment and herd immunity, Singapore has instead aimed for total viral elimination, and the fact that this remains very much a possibility speaks volumes of the impressive efforts made by Singaporeans, and its leader – the Ministry of Health, during this healthcare crisis. ♦

Dr Ganesh is an associate consultant at the Institute of Mental Health. He is passionate about mental health and public policy. In his free time, he avidly follows his favourite team, Liverpool FC, and travels when he can. Each country he visits makes him realise how alike we all are to each other and how much more united mankind should be.





^ KTPH staff contact tracing



^ SAF personnel packing masks



< SAF personnel loading up vans with packed masks to be delivered to community centres and clubs



^ The community isolation facility at the Singapore Expo can house up to 1,800 patients



^ v NUHS personnel setting up Big Box community care facility



< SAF Medical Corps personnel sanitising their equipment outside the community isolation facility at the Singapore Expo



^ NHG personnel donning personal protective equipment for dorm operations



2020

JAN

- 23** ○ First confirmed case. MOH started contact tracing
- Gov.sg WhatsApp started COVID-19 updates
- MOH launched website on COVID-19 Local Situation
- 30** ○ SAF deployed 1,500 NSFs for mask packing

FEB

- 1** ○ Mask Go Where launched
- 4** ○ First COVID-19 cluster identified at Yong Thai Hang Medical Hall
- 7** ○ DORSCON level raised to Orange
- 12** ○ Cluster at Seletar Aerospace Heights construction site identified
- 14** ○ Activation of PHPCs announced
- Flu Go Where launched
- 25** ○ Serological test establishes link between clusters
- 28** ○ Special bonus for HCWs working with COVID-19 patients announced as a show of appreciation

MAR

- 4** ○ Duke-NUS and Arcturus Therapeutics partner to develop COVID-19 vaccine
- 13** ○ Additional precautionary measures implemented, including travel advisories and Stay-Home Notices
- 17** ○ Singaporean students studying overseas encouraged to return home
- 20** ○ TraceTogether app launched
- 21** ○ First 2 deaths reported
- 24** ○ D'resort NTUC converted into isolation facility
- 30** ○ Clap for #SGUnited to show appreciation for front-line HCWs



^ SKCH nurse clinician conducting N95 mask fittings



< CGH staff updates the situation report board on patients unable to self-isolate while awaiting their swab test results



> SGH staff performing a swab



^ Woodlands Health Campus staff serve at the community care facility@Expo

> Exercises with migrant workers at swab isolation facility



v Prep work to support operations at dormitories

v Contact tracing operations at Mandai Hill Camp



APR

- 5 ○ S11 and Westlite Toh Guan Dormitory quarantined due to increasing number of cases
- 7 ○ Circuit breaker began
- 14 ○ MOH deployed medical teams from hospitals/polyclinics to all dormitories
- 23 ○ SafeEntry implemented in hotspots, essential services, selected public venues
- 28 ○ 6 SAF camps converted into community recovery facilities began taking in patients

JUL

- 24 ○ Rapid antibody test kit developed by A*Star and MP Biomedicals Asia Pacific

AUG

- 7 ○ All dormitories completed testing for COVID-19

NOV

- 25 ○ No locally transmitted or dormitory cases reported for 15 days

DEC

- 14 ○ Authorisation granted by HSA for Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine
- 19 ○ MOH started conducting joint webinars on Vaccination Strategy with professional medical bodies
- 21 ○ First batch of vaccines arrived in Singapore
- 28 ○ Phase 3 began
- 30 ○ Staff from NCID first to be vaccinated