

COMBATING A VIRAL STIGMA

Text by Dr Deborah Ng

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the world in more ways than anyone could have ever imagined. Even with all the strict measures implemented, the virus has eluded us and many countries are now experiencing recurrent waves of infection. In combating this, we have witnessed the resilience and resourcefulness of humanity, but also the ugliness that accompanies the fear and stigma of the disease.

A colleague of mine once told me that during the SARS outbreak, his daughter was asked to stay home from school because her parents were healthcare workers (HCWs). As a new parent, I was worried if the same would happen to my daughter. Would she be refused at infant care because her parents were both front-line staff? Why should an innocent

child have to pay for the “sins” of her parents? While that fear did not become a reality, these thoughts played constantly in my mind as I watched the number of cases in the community rise.

As the disease spreads, so does stigma

Stigma is a quality that has permeated every reach of society and exists in many forms, be it of mental health, HIV or some other condition that we don't understand well enough. In confronting a completely new disease which we were still learning about day by day, it was not unexpected that it would generate some degree of fear.

Whenever my colleagues and I went out for lunch, we were cautious to hide our name tags lest we were

denied entry into restaurants. Getting to and from work was a new challenge, with taxis or private hire cars cancelling rides when the destination was “National Centre for Infectious Diseases”. As these acts of discrimination against HCWs grew, with nurses being shooed off trains and ambulance drivers asked not to buy food, then-Senior Parliamentary Secretary Amrin Amin condemned such acts as being disgraceful, and encouraged other Singaporeans to not let fear or stigma get in the way.

While none of us HCWs needed any public admiration, we certainly didn't need to be treated like lepers. When we leave the hospital for the day, we just want to be treated like any other member of the public. Too often, we have seen the ills of social media, with shamers and haters a dime a dozen perpetuating the spread of “fake news”. But social media can be a force for good too. Shortly after these stories of discrimination against HCWs went viral, we rapidly saw an outpouring of love and support for them. One of the welcome and much needed services was GrabCare that provided rides to HCWs, meaning that we wouldn't have to wait endlessly for someone to drive us home after the first two drivers cancelled on us. There were letters penned by schoolchildren,



roses dropped off at the door by anonymous members of the public, food of all sorts from caterers and restaurants, and even letters from the Prime Minister and Health Minister to all HCWs in Singapore. Some also started their own initiatives to provide coffee for HCWs, which went a long way in supporting the hospital establishments that were no longer easily accessible to the public.

Returning home, I was always filled with mixed emotions – partially fearful of bringing an unwelcome “visitor” home, but also happy seeing a smile on my daughter’s face as I walked through the door. Often, I made a beeline for the door in case neighbours found out I worked in the hospital, recalling a story of another colleague whose neighbours began to shut their doors when they saw her walking by, after finding out that she worked at the Communicable Diseases Centre during the SARS outbreak. I thought that surely, others would feel the same now.

Receiving support from all directions

COVID-19 became much more personal to me the day a member of my family became critically ill with it. While most were quick to show concern, there were also colleagues who anxiously asked what they could do to protect themselves if I were diagnosed with COVID-19, given that I had become a close contact. And there it was, the stigma of COVID-19, even among HCWs. However, adversity not only brings out the ugly in people, it can also bring out the best. With my family members isolated in different hospitals across the island,

I relied entirely on the care of my infectious disease (ID) and intensive care colleagues. Although our community of ID clinicians would meet on a weekly basis to engage in interesting clinical discussions, I had not known the true worth of being well connected as an ID community until then.

Just as support within the healthcare family matters, the moral support behind front-liners has been invaluable. When I first read about the #ClapforSGUnited campaign, organised by British expat Martin Verga, I thought to myself, “No one is going to clap. No one really cares. They are just concerned that you might get it at work and spread it to them.” But how wrong I was! As I sat in my living room, I was drawn to the balcony by the sound of thunderous claps and rousing cheers across the complex. As tears filled my eyes, I realised, “Hey, it’s okay. We don’t have to hide who we are or what we do.”

Through the fight against COVID-19, one thing has been evident. Every person wants to do their bit to help. For some – a healthcare worker, engineer or civil servant – the fight means working harder than we have had to before. For others, it means staying home to interrupt the chain of transmission. But it’s hard for us to understand how doing “nothing” can actually be “something”, so why not make use of the time we have to do something more with our talents (sing a song, pen a poem or write a story)? Many Singaporeans have stepped up to help front-line workers, foreign workers and those in need in any way they can. Some

may want to help, but have not the means to do so. It is easy for others to criticise these campaigns, such as the nationwide singalong in April this year. Something tangible or a pay rise would be preferable, one might think. But as Helen Keller said, “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart.” As much as we appreciated all the gifts received, we appreciated the intangible ones just as much because it meant that we were all in this together.

Keeping our fighting spirit alive

In the words of Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the World Health Organization’s Director-General, “We have already lost so much – but we cannot lose hope.” Indeed, the unity and fighting spirit that we share gives us the hope we need as a nation to beat COVID-19. ♦

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