



Stephanie Yeo
Senior Correspondent

When Ms Lem Sok Fang's father was involved in a hit-and-run accident in Batu Pahat, Malaysia, she rushed across the Causeway to his bedside on Nov 26, 2023.

Little did she know she would find herself in the hospital bed next to his, fighting for her life the very next day.

That morning, the Singaporean, then aged 40, had been working remotely as a corporate secretary services provider, typing on her laptop at her father's bedside. She ate a bit of his spicy hospital lunch as he was unable to eat solid food.

Right after her meal, she felt dizzy and vomited thrice. She lost control of her body and could not reach the call button at her father's bed.

Desperate, she called her older brother and one of her younger sisters who lived in Malaysia, but they were too far away to come immediately. As her vision faded, she punched the keypad blindly and managed to reach her brother again, telling him: "Please help, I'm going to die."

"Shout, just shout," he urged her, even as he raced to drive to the hospital from his home in Melaka.

The nurses rushed in after she yelled for help. It was only then that she let her body relax and fall to the ground, she recalls.

The hospital's experts initially thought she had vertigo, but later diagnosed her condition as a stroke, although they could not figure out why. Ms Lem, the second of six siblings who had moved to Singapore to work in 2006 when she was 23, was young for a stroke patient and did not have high blood pressure or other risk factors.

Meanwhile, she could not sit up for a few days without falling and spent her nights vomiting, so much so that her 66-year-old father complained about the noise. He was unaware that his daughter was in the next bed until her second day of hospitalisation, as the family wanted to spare him the stress.

"I could never have imagined that this would happen to me," says Ms Lem, who reckons that sheer willpower kept her going as she did not want to leave her three young sons, aged six to 14, motherless. Her Singaporean husband, Mr Tan Chee Seong, 44, works as a senior captain in the food and beverage line and the family live in a four-room flat in Chua Chu Kang.

After the fourth day, she recovered quickly and asked to be discharged, as she had no insurance coverage in Malaysia. She still felt dizzy at times and could not walk in a straight line.

STROKE MAY BE A SIGN OF HOLE IN THE HEART

Once back home, she saw the brain and heart teams at the National University Hospital (NUH) and the



'Please help, I'm going to die'

In the lead-up to World Stroke Day on Oct 29, stroke survivors talk about their condition and recovery journey

Ms Lem Sok Fang discovered that she had a hole in her heart after suffering a stroke at age 40. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHINI

National University Heart Centre, Singapore (NUHCS), and found out that she had patent foramen ovale (PFO), more commonly known as a hole in the heart condition.

Individuals with a PFO may develop a stroke if small blood clots travel through the abnormal connection within the heart and obstruct blood flow to the brain, says Adjunct Assistant Professor Benjamin Tan, a consultant from the division of neurology at NUH's Department of Medicine.

About one in four people have holes in the heart, says Assistant Professor Lim Yinghao, a consultant from the Department of Cardiology at NUHCS. Most do not show symptoms and may never require treatment.

A stroke may be the first sign of a PFO, says Prof Lim, who advises younger stroke patients with no risk factors to get a heart check-up.

A recent study by NUH and NUHCS' heart-brain team found that the prevalence of PFO rose to about 40 per cent in young patients who had ischemic strokes without a known cause. The team sees some 75 young adults with unexplained strokes each year and evaluates them to rule out the condition.

Perhaps the most high-profile PFO case is model and entrepreneur Hailey Bieber, who turns 28 in November. She revealed on Instagram Stories in March 2023 that it had been a year since she had a mini stroke, which led to the discovery of her hole in the heart condition.

Ms Lem's condition put her at risk of a more severe stroke if left



untreated, so she underwent a minimally invasive PFO device closure procedure on May 3. Seven days later, she left for an eight-day holiday to Yunnan province in China, together with her youngest son, her sister and sister-in-law.

There, she scaled part of a 4,000m-high mountain and surprised herself by being fitter than her sister.

Now 41, Ms Lem says the experience has left her with a profound desire to treasure every day. Another trip to China is being planned, this time with all her children and some of her extended family.

According to the latest available

data from the Singapore Stroke Registry Annual Report 2021, which was published in 2023, the number of strokes suffered by residents here increased from 6,143 episodes in 2011 to 9,680 episodes in 2021.

Most stroke patients are aged 60 and above, but more younger people are increasingly affected. The report showed that the incidence rate of stroke among those aged 40 to 49 leapt by 50 cent over a decade, from 73.4 to 97.5 per 100,000 population between 2011 and 2021.

The corresponding figure for those aged 30 to 39 jumped by a third, from 17.8 to 26.4 per 100,000 population across the same period.

DOCTOR SHARES STROKE JOURNEY ON TIKTOK

Dermatologist Jessica Ee, 33, similarly found out about her PFO condition when she had a mini stroke, or transient ischemic attack, in August 2023.

After dinner with friends, she suddenly developed slurred speech and could not form the words to answer, even though she knew what she wanted to say in her head.

The episode lasted about 10 minutes, so by the time she went to the nearest hospital – Singapore General Hospital – her symptoms had subsided. Subsequent tests

uncovered a "very small" hole in her heart, but the two cardiologists she saw said surgery was unnecessary and not worth the risk.

The associate consultant, who has been with Sengkang General Hospital since 2023, recounted the incident on TikTok. Her TikTok channel (tiktok.com/@dr.jessica.ee), where she posts skincare advice and reviews, has more than 13,400 followers.

She went on to suffer a major stroke on Oct 23, 2023, and was discharged almost seven months later in May. The 1.8m-tall former runway model and finalist in The New Paper New Face contest in 2012 is now undergoing rehabilitation five days a week, including dance therapy, as she cannot stand and walk independently.

She says she started posting videos about her second stroke in March because "I thought it might give people a better idea about stroke patients and hopefully this can also help them to be in a better position to support and care for them".

Comments like "you're improving, you look better in every post" are encouraging, she adds.

"Sometimes, life throws surprises and disasters at you. Continue to persevere through your challenges, be hardworking and have self-discipline," she says.

"A setback is a set-up for you to come back, and you can come back stronger than before. As you are taking the time to eventually make the comeback, always remember to be kind to yourself."

stephyeo@sph.com.sg

Cat and art therapy for stroke patients

Over four weeks in September, Madam Mahani Abdul Shariff, 60, dabbled in art jamming and interacted with cats as part of her stroke rehabilitation.

She was one of four stroke survivors from Stroke Support Station (S3) participating in a pilot Kit-Fit programme organised by the stroke-focused community rehabilitation and wellness agency and Wildflower Studio, an art jamming space and rescue cat cafe at Enabling Village. Each weekly session lasted 90 minutes.

Madam Mahani had suffered symptoms similar to a stroke after brain surgery complications led to bleeding in the brain in 2023. She struggled to regain her strength and speech after the episode, but after a year with S3, she is more independent and has more confidence, says her daughter Farhana Khanafee, 34, a community manager in the interior design industry.

"We had a family cat who passed away a few years ago.

Being able to pet and interact with the cats brought back so many fond memories. Painting a bag during the art jamming session also reminded her that she is still able to find joy in the little things despite all that she's been through," Ms Farhana adds.

Ms Liaw Ying Hong, S3's manager of Wellness & Community Health, says it launched the pilot to explore the benefits of animal-assisted therapy for physical and emotional rehabilitation.

"Stroke survivors often face challenges like muscle weakness, depression and anxiety. Based on feedback, therapy animals, including cats, can provide emotional support, reduce stress and stimulate cognitive and motor function," she says.

The occupational therapists involved in the pilot observed that it helped elevate participants' moods and encouraged engagement and social interaction, she adds. S3 hopes to roll out an improved version of the programme.



Madam Mahani Abdul Shariff enjoying her interaction with a cat during the Kit-Fit pilot programme organised by Stroke Support Station and Wildflower Studio. PHOTO: STROKE SUPPORT STATION

S3, which serves some 300 clients, has seen an increase in younger clients below age 60 seeking its services, Ms Liaw notes, even as the number of older patients continues to grow with Singapore's super ageing population.

The agency also offers other unusual rehabilitation programmes like hand chimes and kickboxing.

Patients are fully subsidised or pay up to \$5 a session.

Stroke patients who cannot travel to rehabilitation centres can also make use of home therapy services by organisations such as AWWA.

About 30 to 40 per cent of such clients it serves are stroke survivors, says Mr Patrick Troy, senior manager of Home Therapy at

AWWA, which has been providing such services for nine years. Most of its clients are 60 and older.

Mr Andrew Chiong, 50, a former sales director in the maritime industry, suffered a stroke in November 2022 and lost his ability to perform all the activities of daily living. He was tube-fed and had difficulty speaking.

He credits his progress to the

therapists at AWWA, as he can now enjoy some of his favourite food and drinks as his swallowing has improved. He can also move part of the right side of his body, with support from his caregivers.

While some may think that stroke patients have limited recovery potential, Mr Troy says that early intervention and rehabilitation, especially in the first few months, can make a huge difference.

"Although the brain doesn't generate new cells, it can reorganise itself through a process known as synaptic plasticity. This can lead to significant functional gains, such as being able to walk to the coffee shop downstairs and enjoy a cup of coffee with friends," he says.

The Ministry of Health's Stroke Services Improvement team's campaign for 2024 encourages people to call 995 immediately if they see someone having a stroke. Symptoms can include face drooping, arm weakness and speech difficulties.

Go to its social media pages at facebook.com/spotstroke and instagram.com/spotstroke to learn more.