

# The women on the front line in NUH's battle against coronavirus

Amrita Kaur

The coronavirus outbreak in Singapore is not showing any signs of letting up. The same goes for the women at the forefront of the battle at the National University Hospital (NUH).

Associate Professor Sophia Archuleta, head and senior consultant of the division of infectious diseases at NUH, oversees a team of 16 doctors taking care of infected patients admitted to the hospital.

"What the team learns during this outbreak will be useful for future situations that Singapore will face. As this may not be the last time that an outbreak like this happens, it is part of our job to train the next generation of infectious diseases specialists as well," said Prof Archuleta, 46, who is also president of the National University Health System (NUHS) Women in Science and Healthcare initiative.

She works closely with the director of hospital epidemiology at NUH, Dr Natasha Bagdasarian, 43, who heads a team responsible for the contact tracing and activity mapping of patients admitted to NUH and Alexandra Hospital, two of the hospitals under NUHS.

Dr Bagdasarian's job involves looking at the patients' movements within and outside hospital in the past 14 days, and providing information to the Ministry of Health (MOH) so that it can look for community clusters or exposures.

From the moment a person is confirmed to have the virus, Prof Archuleta and Dr Bagdasarian track the location of the patient to determine if he has been admitted to a pandemic ward or sent home to wait for test results after visiting the emergency department.

"If the identified patient was swabbed and sent home, we will have to respond immediately by informing the patient, activating an ambulance and notifying MOH.

"We also prepare an available bed for the patient, and bring him or her up to the ward while ensuring the procedures are done safely without exposing anyone unnecessarily," said Prof Archuleta.

The doctors in the pandemic teams work according to a roster. Each team consists of residents, senior residents and a consultant who are responsible for giving direct medical care to the patients.

Prof Archuleta pointed out that many patients receive calls and messages from friends who want to find out when they last met and if they are at risk of contracting the virus. "It could be frustrating for them when they get 20 messages a day from their friends, and each one of them kind of wants to know if they are at risk.

"We don't deal directly with these messages... most of the time, it's something that the patients manage on their own, and we manage the emotional state of the pa-



At National University Hospital, Associate Professor Sophia Archuleta (left) is head and senior consultant of the division of infectious diseases, and Ms Clara Sin is the chief operating officer who determines how the hospital manages its operations during a virus outbreak. PHOTOS: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HEALTH SYSTEM



Prof Archuleta having a discussion with her team members. She oversees a team of 16 doctors who take care of coronavirus-infected patients who have been admitted to the National University Hospital.

tients," shared Prof Archuleta.

The unpredictable nature of the job keeps Dr Bagdasarian on her toes, but that is what she loves about it.

"I never know when we could get a case that requires contact tracing,

It could be late in the evening, or on a weekend, or while I'm having my dinner. I often do my work after office hours, wherever I am," she said.

Things run smoothly at NUH, thanks to chief operating officer Clara Sin, who also heads the run-

ning of the NUHS operations centre – the nerve centre of the fight against Covid-19 at NUHS.

Said Ms Sin, 49: "Some of the key areas that we monitor are the availability of isolation beds, patient and visitor screening, supply of per-



ON THE JOB AT ALL HOURS

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**DR NATASHA BAGDASARIAN**, director of hospital epidemiology at the National University Hospital, on the need to respond quickly to every case.



Chief operating officer Clara Sin and her team monitor the availability of isolation beds, patient and visitor screening, and the supply of protection equipment.

sonal protection equipment as well as the health and wellness of our staff."

Her team also works closely with MOH and formulates policies on how the hospital will manage its operations during such an outbreak.

The achievements of all three women in their field are notable, as most of the top leadership roles in healthcare are filled by men. International Women's Day, which falls today, seeks to celebrate such accomplishments by women.

Said Prof Archuleta: "Everybody is working extremely hard – men,

women, everyone, we are one big troop in the response to the fight against Covid-19."

However, she noted that as people climb the career ladder, there tends to be much fewer women leaders than men leaders. One of the problems, she feels, is the lack of role models.

"I hope that by being in this position, Clara being in her position, and Natasha being in her position, more women will see that there are role models in our field."

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