

Bouncing back from Sars with more love for nursing

During the 15 days she spent in a ward for Sars patients at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) in 2003, Ms Pauline Chong thought often of her mother.

Then a junior nurse in her early 20s, Ms Chong had taken a very ill patient to the coronary care unit at the National University Hospital (NUH) during a night shift. The patient was later found to be infected with the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars.

A day later, Ms Chong developed a rapidly rising fever. She was later taken to TTSH where her temperature continued to climb, hitting 39.5 deg C at one point. Anxious thoughts raced through her mind as she fought chills and body aches during her hospitalisation.

She worried that she might have inadvertently infected her mother. She would feel depressed at the thought of the many things she had yet to accomplish and wondered if she would even survive.

Ms Chong, now 40, is currently a senior nurse clinician in the general and geriatric wards at Alexandra Hospital.

Ms Noor Melati Ahmad, 38, another nurse who had been working in the same NUH ward as Ms Chong, also caught the virus from a patient during a night shift.

She was also warded at TTSH. Like Ms Chong, she felt very weak and experienced body aches, chills and had difficulty breathing.

"A few days after I was admitted, it hit me that I could actually die from it," said Ms Melati, now 38. The nurse clinician still works at NUH looking after immunocompromised patients.

"I was very worried and when I called my mum every day, we would cry. There were days when she would check on me but I was too ill to pick up the phone."

She added: "It felt very unfair that just two years into my work as a nurse, I would contract this and might leave my loved ones behind."

Both Ms Chong, a Catholic, and Ms Melati, a Muslim, sought solace in prayer. Words of support and simple gifts from their loved ones also helped, they said, and they would encourage each other over the phone.

They eventually recovered and came away with a stronger passion for nursing.

Ms Melati said her grandmother had wanted her to quit, but her mother encouraged her to continue. She added: "I did not fall to Sars and that affirmed that if I want to do good, God would protect me and I should continue on my path as a nurse."

Ms Chong said she never once thought of quitting, but she is more disciplined and vigilant about safety protocols today because of her experience. "I was actually very excited when I went back to



Ms Pauline Chong, 40, works as a senior nurse clinician in the general and geriatric wards at Alexandra Hospital. She caught the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars, in 2003 when working as a junior nurse at the National University Hospital. PHOTOS: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HEALTH SYSTEM



Nurse clinician Noor Melati Ahmad, 38, works at National University Hospital (NUH), looking after patients with a weakened immune system. Ms Melati, who worked in the same NUH ward as Ms Chong in 2003, also caught Sars from a patient during a night shift.



RELIEVING STRESS

I trained my parrot to say 'ni hao' ('how are you?' in Mandarin). It gives me satisfaction even though the pronunciation is not very clear at the moment.



MS PAULINE CHONG, a senior nurse clinician in the general and geriatric wards at Alexandra Hospital. The former Sars patient says the experience has made her more resilient, but she is not immune to anxiety about Covid-19. She de-stresses by playing with her pet birds and dog.



REALITY CHECK

A few days after I was admitted, it hit me that I could actually die from it... I was very worried and when I called my mum every day, we would cry... It felt very unfair that just two years into my work as a nurse, I would contract this and might leave my loved ones behind.



MS NOOR MELATI AHMAD, a nurse clinician at the National University Hospital (NUH), recalling how she experienced body aches, chills and had difficulty breathing after contracting Sars when working as a nurse at NUH in 2003.

From Sars to Covid-19

SCAN TO WATCH

<https://str.sg/survivingsars>

work alongside my colleagues," she added.

The experience has made her more resilient, but she is not immune to anxiety about Covid-19.

Asked how she deals with this stress, Ms Chong said self-care is very important.

She added that she has taken to playing the violin after work and

also de-stresses by playing with her pet birds and dog.

"I trained my parrot to say 'ni hao' ('how are you?' in Mandarin). It gives me satisfaction even though the pronunciation is not very clear at the moment," she said with a laugh.

Rei Kurohi