

Source: The Sunday Times, Pages A1, C1 & C4
Date: 10 March 2024

SUNDAY MARCH 10, 2024

THE SUNDAY TIMES

She couldn't
walk, talk,
eat or
breathe
| **C4**



Source: The Sunday Times, Pages A1, C1 & C4
Date: 10 March 2024

| SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2024 | THE SUNDAY TIMES |

life

NOT JUST BUBBLE TEA & STREET FOOD •
Why Taiwan might well be the flavour of 2024 | C9

BAZAAR BITES •
Where to break fast this Ramadan | C10&11



In the wait for their BTO flats, some millennial couples are turning to renting and living abroad, prioritising living in the now even if it means an added expense. **Amanda Chai** reports. **C2&3**

Better together, overseas?

Some couples are choosing to rent abroad - such as Ms Chia Hong and Mr Tim Suen in Bali (top left), and Mr Justin Yeong and Ms Niki Lee in Johor Bahru (right) - while others, like Ms Marilyn Chew and Mr Low Jian Sheng (above) - have taken on the nomadic life.



My husband, my lifeline
He was her caregiver when she couldn't walk, talk, eat **C4**



Family frolics
March holiday outings for all budgets **C5**

DESIGN: SALLY LAM | PHOTOS: CHONG JUN LIANG, SHIRAGHYSHOULDER, COURTESY OF CLARA HONG, NG SOR LUAN, EDDINO ABDUL HADI

Source: The Sunday Times, Pages A1, C1 & C4
Date: 10 March 2024

She could not walk, talk, eat or breathe

Husband Kannon Kwan cared for wife Linda through her autoimmune ordeal, even creating a communication board so he could be her "voice"



Stephanie Yeo
Senior Correspondent

Mr Kannon Kwan watched as his wife Linda's health deteriorated before his eyes over some seven weeks in 2023.

Gone was the vibrant woman he met at a hiking group in 2015, the intrepid solo traveller and rock climber who won his heart.

At her lowest point, Mrs Kwan, 42, could not walk, talk, eat or breathe. Her body was hooked up to a phalanx of machines at National University Hospital (NUH).

Her nightmare began on the night of Sept 24, when she suffered a "super bad" headache. Her hands felt numb.

The marketing communications executive saw a general practitioner the next morning, who found that she could not balance and had symptoms similar to a stroke.

Mr Kwan, 47, rushed her to the accident and emergency department at NUH, but a computerised tomography scan, magnetic resonance imaging and spinal tap revealed nothing.

Her condition worsened on her second day there. She could not walk unaided to the bathroom, started slurring when she spoke, and vomited everything she ingested.

The next day, she was placed in a high dependency unit, then admitted to the intensive care unit.

Her doctors told her she had Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS), a rare autoimmune disorder in which the body produces harmful antibodies that attack its own nervous system.

There are about 1.35 cases of GBS per 100,000 people a year in Singapore, says Dr Amanda Chin, associate consultant at NUH's division of neurology in the department of medicine.

Symptoms vary and include tingling and weakness starting in the feet, which can later spread to the upper body and arms, as well as difficulties with speaking, chewing or swallowing.

While symptoms of a stroke affect one side of the body, GBS affects both sides and can develop over a few days to one or two



Mr Kannon Kwan became his wife Linda's caregiver when she was stricken by Guillain-Barre syndrome in 2023. He is one of the winners of the Inaugural National University Health System Caregiver Awards. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

weeks, Dr Chin says. It cannot be prevented.

The Kwans did not realise the severity of the condition at first. They had never heard of it.

"When I saw her start to slur and lose her mobility at an alarming rate, the feeling is like, you know that this is going to be bad, but you still have to be positive," says Mr Kwan, a business strategy consultant.

He was one of eight winners of the recent inaugural National University Health System (NUHS) Caregiver Awards, which were presented on Feb 24 and part of the annual NUHS Caregivers' Day.

Mrs Kwan received a five-day intravenous (IV) therapy course on Sept 27 to reduce the inflammation caused by the overactive antibodies in her system. Her doctors told her that her condition would worsen before peaking after about 28 days.

Three days later, she struggled to breathe and had to have respiratory support using a breathing tube, or intubation, and ventilator. About a week later, her medical team tried to see if she could step down from that, but she required intubation again.

"After the second intubation, my condition got worse," she says. "I couldn't move my legs, and my hand movements were limited. I couldn't even press the call button."

In mid-October, she was given an extra two-day dose of the IV therapy.

During her ordeal, Mr Kwan's days revolved around her needs. After dropping off their two children, then three and 5½, at preschool, he would head to the hospital to massage her limbs and read inspiring stories to her.

Meanwhile, his mother-in-law stepped up to care for the children.

When I saw her start to slur and lose her mobility at an alarming rate, the feeling is like, you know that this is going to be bad, but you still have to be positive.

”

MR KANNON KWAN on his wife Linda, who was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disorder in which the body produces harmful antibodies that attack its own nervous system

Friends took them on outings and to enrichment classes. His company also gave him the time and space to be there for his wife.

During his daily vigils, Mr Kwan kept a close eye on her vitals, cheering her up whenever he saw improvements, as it pained him to see her staring blankly at the ceiling.

"She couldn't be bothered by these things because she was in constant pain. But you try to be very positive – like today, her oxygen level is 95 per cent, 3 per cent better than yesterday," he says.

Around week three of her ordeal, he created a customised communication board as the hospital's did not cater to her needs, leaving her frustrated and him confused.

His laminated board contains a row of vowels at the top, followed by the alphabet separated into two halves.

She could not see the board as

her vision was affected, so he would start by asking her if the word she wanted started with a vowel. She would nod when he reached the correct letter.

If the letter she wanted was a consonant, he would ask if it was in the first or second half of the alphabet, and then read the letters from the respective half until she nodded.

This way, he would slowly piece together the letters, words and sentences she was trying to communicate.

"I would stay by her side and basically be her voice," says Mr Kwan. "It was a very painful process, but it was very accurate."

The fiercely independent Mrs Kwan says she could not accept that she had lost control over her body. "I often thought, 'Why me?' I was always in pain, I couldn't sleep, so that's when I got depressed."

"I used the communication board to tell him I didn't want to live."

Mr Kwan says: "I knew what she wanted to say, but I told her, 'No, don't go there.'"

He alerted the doctor about her depressive state and a psychiatrist was assigned to help her.

After about seven weeks, her condition stabilised. She was transferred to the high dependency ward on Nov 15.

When she went off the ventilator and could speak again with the help of a speaking valve on Nov 23, Mrs Kwan's first raspy utterance was her husband's name: Kannon.

"I was happy," she says. "I hadn't heard her voice for two months."

Mrs Kwan was discharged on Dec 28 and thereafter spent a month in Alexandra Hospital for rehabilitation. She started a second rehab programme on March 8 at St Luke's Hospital.

The experience has brought her closer to her husband, she says, while he thinks it has helped them understand each other better.

How long she will take to get back on her feet is uncertain. For now, she can walk a little using a walker, but her hands are still weak, she says.

Dr Chin says the recovery period varies, and some patients may have residual weakness for years.

It may take a while, but Mr Kwan, who describes his wife as resilient in the face of adversity, has one simple wish for her: "I'm looking forward to seeing her walk the kids to school one day."

stephyeo@sph.com.sg