

MEDIA RELEASE

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OLDER ADULT SINGAPOREANS DEMONSTRATED RESILIENCE IN COPING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: NUHS STUDY

Singapore — A new study by a team of researchers from the National University Health System (NUHS), in collaboration with the People’s Association (PA), Pioneer and Ulu Pandan Constituency Offices, the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC)’s outreach arm - the Silver Generation Office (SGO), and various other community service providers, has found that Singapore has been able to provide well-rounded support for able-bodied and community-dwelling seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also found that these older adults aged 65 years and above are resilient and capable of proactively managing their wellness with the assistance and guidance of various practical resources that were rolled out to help Singaporeans during the pandemic. Promoting high awareness among the public and seniors, coupled with synergistic collaborations between community service providers, grassroots organisations, government linked organisations, and the community at large were also key in creating a safety net of resources and initiatives that helped seniors to positively adapt to pandemic living.

Led by Associate Professor Tan Ker Kan, Head and Senior Consultant, Division of Colorectal Surgery, and Vice Chairman (Research), Medical Board, National University Hospital, and Assistant Dean (Research), NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, the study was done to understand the first-hand experiences and impact of the pandemic on the lives of seniors. To date, it is the first and only study in Singapore that qualitatively examined the experiential impact of COVID-19 pandemic living on the wellbeing of seniors.

A/Prof Tan explained, “The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to everyone. Older adults are perhaps more vulnerable to faring poorly in many aspects. As they are at higher risk of a worse outcome if they were to contract COVID-19, they were advised to isolate themselves from the rest of their social networks. These include their family members, children, grandchildren and friends in the community. Studies from overseas showed that the elderly were at higher risk of developing anxiety and depression during COVID-19. However, as Singapore entered an endemic phase with regard to living with COVID-19, we wanted to meet and hear from the seniors in the community first-hand to get better insight into our seniors’ perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on their lives and how they were coping.” A/Prof Tan was also a Theme Principal Investigator of NUHS’s Singapore Population HEalth ImpRovement Centre (SPHERiC) and previously led a study that examined the psychological and social impact of COVID-19 on primary care physicians.

For this study, the team conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 62 seniors living in Pioneer, Buona Vista, Bukit Batok and Sengkang, recruited through partners such as the Pioneer and Ulu Pandan Constituency Offices, as well as SGO from January to June 2022. The participants were asked about how COVID-19 and safe management measures impacted their routines, physical health, emotional health and relationships. The researchers also interviewed 14 staff from providers of community services and the SGO, who actively reached out to seniors to understand their needs, and connected them to active ageing programmes, befriending, care and support services, as well as digital tools. They were asked about the challenges they faced in their work during the pandemic and how they had to adapt and transform work processes to ensure that they could continue to meet the needs of seniors while preventing COVID-19 transmission.

Mr Patrick Tay, BBM, Member of Parliament for Pioneer SMC, said, “This meaningful study led by NUHS and our community partners provided insights to our community volunteers and myself on the health and mental-health related needs of the elderly in our Pioneer Community. The study findings will help my team and me to better plan and organize programmes and activities to better serve our elderly residents. We need to stand prepared and be able to better respond to their needs in the event of any future exigencies.”

Spokespersons from Pioneer and Ulu Pandan Constituency Offices said, “This is indeed a very meaningful and timely study on the seniors in Pioneer, Ulu Pandan and other parts of Singapore as we enter the new normal of living with COVID-19. It also validates the importance of strong partnership among the various community stakeholders to strengthen the support network around seniors when circumstances call for it.”

“We are glad to support this meaningful study by bringing the seniors and various community partners together, for them to share how they managed during the pandemic,” said SGO Chief, Mr Sim Tiong Kian. “We also contributed our experience of adapting our outreach modality from face-to-face visits to telephone calls and digital tools, to ensure that we continue to support seniors, especially those with low or no social support, throughout the pandemic.” Mr Sim added, “It is heartening to see that the findings of the study affirmed that SGO, along with other community service providers, were able to adapt and respond effectively to the challenges posed by COVID-19.”

The NUHS study found that seniors faced emotional challenges due to the limited social contact, activities and ability to celebrate meaningful life events with their families and friends and it was especially difficult for them when it came to events such as the hospitalisation and/or the death of close others. They were also initially fearful of COVID-19 and isolated themselves to stay safe. However, at the same time, they showed a strong sense of independence, high awareness and initiative in managing both their physical and mental wellbeing. They purposefully incorporated strategies for both into their daily routines. For example, some seniors committed to early morning walks or exercise, alongside scheduling in social calls, playing card games, or learning new hobbies from online video streaming platforms. Seniors who had adult children, cited them as important sources of support and engagement. Many also cited community service providers as strong avenues for social support, engagement activities and practical go-to resources. In general, there was strong support for getting

vaccinated among the seniors as doing so allowed them to re-engage with activities after the circuit breaker with less worry. Moreover, many believed in the protective effects of vaccination for themselves and their loved ones. The perception that Singapore was managing the pandemic better than other countries also contributed to the confidence felt by the seniors.

The study showed that community service providers leveraged new digital platforms and resources to reach out to more seniors in the community. They were also pivotal in bridging receptive seniors into using digital resources such as mobile messaging and video meeting applications to connect with others and engage with activities online. Frequent repeated advertisements on COVID-19-related services and resources for seniors through traditional media like radio and television broadcasts helped build awareness among seniors and also allowed members of the public to identify and refer seniors who were more vulnerable to community service providers. Community service providers were also essential to achieving high levels of vaccination against COVID-19 by arranging for and bringing vaccinations to seniors, especially among those who were isolated or had mobility issues. In 2021, SGO focused its efforts on supporting the nation's COVID-19 vaccination drive by partnering PA in its outreach efforts. They reached out to more than 700,000 seniors and encouraged them to get vaccinated, as well as facilitated their vaccination journey.

“We were pleasantly surprised by the findings from this study. Our community has done well to support the average senior population through a multi-pronged outreach approach. Our seniors demonstrated resilience and independence in coping with the challenges posed by the pandemic. The fact that they felt well-supported by the community service providers, who functioned as a nexus for social supports, activities and resources, speaks volume of the strong social fabric that anchored Singapore,” said A/Prof Tan.

Chinese Glossary

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People's Association (PA)	人民协会
Ulu Pandan Constituency Office	乌鲁班丹选区办事处

Pioneer Constituency Office	先驱选区办事处
Agency for Integrated Care (AIC)	护联中心
Silver Generation Office	关爱乐龄办事处
Mr Patrick Tay, BBM Member of Parliament for Pioneer SMC	郑德源 先驱选区国会议员
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The National University Health System (NUHS) aims to transform how illness is prevented and managed by discovering causes of disease, development of more effective treatments through collaborative multidisciplinary research and clinical trials, and creation of better technologies and care delivery systems in partnership with others who share the same values and vision.

Institutions in the NUHS Group include the National University Hospital, Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, Jurong Community Hospital and Alexandra Hospital; three National Specialty Centres - National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS), National University Heart Centre, Singapore (NUHCS) and National University Centre for Oral Health, Singapore (NUCOHS); the National University Polyclinics (NUP); Jurong Medical Centre; and three NUS health sciences schools – NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (including the Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies), NUS Faculty of Dentistry and NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

With member institutions under a common governance structure, NUHS creates synergies for the advancement of health by integrating patient care, health science education and biomedical research.

As a Regional Health System, NUHS works closely with health and social care partners across Singapore to develop and implement programmes that contribute to a healthy and engaged population in the Western part of Singapore.

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