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the Covid-19
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Nurses – the heart of Covid-19 care

For many nurses, the past seven months have been the most challenging they have experienced, as they battled on the front lines of the Covid-19 pandemic. This Nurses' Day, **Shabana Begum** speaks to some of them about their experiences.

MORE FRONT-LINE FACES

Nurses – from staff nurses to a chief nurse – share their sacrifices and triumphs in the coronavirus fight. [HOME B2](#)

Treated patients as brothers

KATHERINE LEONG, 49

Assistant director of nursing
National University Hospital (NUH)
Advanced practice nurse
Khoo Teck Puat – National University
Children's Medical Institute, NUH

The migrant workers who streamed out of the buses and stood in front of the community care facility (CCF) in Tuas South looked dazed and nervous.

But they seemed more at ease when they saw the group of health-care workers, clad in thick personal protective equipment (PPE), waving to and welcoming them.

Ms Katherine Leong, 49, who led the nursing team at the Tuas South CCF, knows a smattering of Bengali and Tamil from meeting patients and families as an advanced practice nurse with the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute at the National University Hospital (NUH).

“When the migrant workers arrived, I greeted them by saying ‘kemon acho’, which means ‘how are you’ in Bengali,” said Ms Leong, who is also the assistant director of nursing at NUH.

“The brothers laughed and thought it was amusing, and greeted me back, and that broke the ice a little,” she added, referring to the migrant workers.

Ms Leong and her team of 28 NUH nurses and locum nurses, along with the medical team, made it a point to call the workers brothers.

The Tuas South facility, the National University Health System's first CCF, was set up in mid-May to house about 1,600 Covid-19 patients who were asymptomatic or had mild symptoms.

In late April, Ms Leong led the nursing team in setting up the facility and was deployed there until early last month.

Her team was in charge of setting up a medical post, training the non-medical staff on infection control and how to properly don and remove PPE, and taking care of the migrant workers.

“Once, a migrant worker came up to me and said: ‘Ma’am, I give you money, you buy phone for me.’ His phone was broken, and he hadn't spoken to his family in five days.

“During a nurses' meeting, a colleague told me she had an old phone that she could pass to him.”

Ms Leong also fondly recalled a helpful Indian migrant worker in his 40s who helped the nurses teach the patients how to measure and record their vital signs on tablets.

“He spontaneously went to different groups to teach them how to use the equipment to measure blood pressure and take temperature.



Ms Katherine Leong led the nursing team at the Tuas South community care facility, which was set up to house and take care of about 1,600 migrant workers with Covid-19 who were asymptomatic or had mild symptoms. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

“Throughout his eight- to 10-day stay, he would come to the admissions area at 10am, when the buses started arriving, and at noon, he wouldn't go for lunch because more migrant workers were coming. We had to insist that he go and eat be-

fore returning,” she said.

Ms Leong said the workers were appreciative of being taken care of in the CCF. “They always said ‘thank you so much’. If we were sweating through our PPE, our hair damp and goggles fogged up, the brothers

would feel bad for us and say ‘Ma’am, very hot, ah. Sweat too much’.

“One of my nurses jokingly replied, ‘Never mind. It's like a sauna, can lose weight’.”

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Senior staff nurse Nathanael Tan keeps a distance from his wife and two young sons so that he will not unknowingly put them in danger. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

No hugs, no kisses... for now

NATHANAEL TAN, 29

Senior staff nurse

National University Hospital,
Emergency Medicine Department

It has been seven months since Mr Nathanael Tan, 29, has held his sons – who are aged one and three – close.

“No hugs, no kisses. It is very emotionally distant for my two kids, especially because they like getting goodnight hugs and morning kisses,” said Mr Tan, a senior staff nurse at the National University Hospital’s Emergency Medicine Department (EMD).

Being in the first line of defence against Covid-19, Mr Tan has attended to EMD patients who were later found to be infected with the coronavirus.

Although he is dressed in personal protective equipment at work, maintaining a distance from his family gives him further reassurance that he is not unknowingly putting them in danger.

After showering in the hospital before heading home, Mr Tan would take a second shower at

home before retiring to a separate bedroom next to his wife and children’s.

Mr Tan’s older son, who is scared of thunder, used to snuggle against him for comfort.

“It’s the rainy season now and at night when there is thunder, he will cry out for me and I can’t do anything. I can’t comfort him. The only thing I can do is video-call him,” he said.

Without goodbye hugs at the door, his children will occasionally cry when Mr Tan leaves for work.

“At first it was very sad, but we nurses took a pledge to help at all times, in pandemic periods and safe periods.”

Mr Tan is also no stranger to wary looks on public transport.

In April, when he hailed a taxi in civilian clothes, the driver asked him why he was going to the EMD before letting him in.

“When I entered the taxi, he wound down all the windows.

“It was understandable. Everyone has his fears, we nurses also have our fears.”

Shabana Begum