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, 49, 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 39.8 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 49, 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 admitted to 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: “I 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 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 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.

Ms Pauline Chong, 49, 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
Sars survivor helps tend to potential Covid-19 patients

As a consultant emergency physician at National University Hospital, Dr Ong Pei Yun has had to tend to potential Covid-19 patients.

The 42-year-old strives to calm and reassure them as she tests them for the disease.

She understands their emotional turbulence: She herself was a Sars patient.

When Covid-19 hit Singapore in January, she felt a dreaded sense of deja vu. “Oh, it was like Sars all over again. I don’t want to go through it all over again.”

In 2003, she contracted the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars), never felt sicker in her life and was warded for 14 days in hospital.

She was 26 then, a first-year medical officer at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the designated hospital to treat Sars patients.

She was also a bride-to-be.

It started with a high fever that refused to break. And she almost blacked out one morning after getting out of bed.

She remembers the unremitting fever, the chills and the body aches. She also came down with pneumonia. “It was the worst illness I have had,” she said.

The physical suffering aside, the isolation she experienced when she was warded was also hard to bear.

“My parents and two brothers were quarantined at home and she was not allowed visitors.

But calls from loved ones and prayers helped her through that dark period.

“A lot of people rang and asked how I was. Their words of encouragement helped. Some family and friends dropped off food,” she said.

“Those little things helped.”

She felt very grateful to survive Sars without suffering any lasting complications, for she had colleagues who died.

A total of 238 people were infected with Sars here and 33 died.

Nine months after her illness, Dr Ong tied the knot with her boyfriend from medical school. She suffered some hair loss during the Sars treatment, but they grew back in time for the wedding.

Her husband is a paediatrician and they now have two children, aged 10 and 14.

When Covid-19 struck, the initial days of grappling with yet another unknown virus was “a bit challenging”, she said.

Dr Ong, who has tested at least one Covid-19 patient, said: “I reminded myself this is what we are called to do. We are trained to do this. The time that we have prepared for is here now.”

She said Singapore’s Sars experience has helped the country to better tackle the current crisis, for example, in ramping up the number of isolation beds, among other measures.

When she was infected with Sars, she was warded in a four-bed ward due to the lack of isolation rooms then.

And everyone, from the healthcare system to the public, has a role to play in keeping frontliners like healthcare staff safe, she said.

Dr Ong knows from experience it is important to care for oneself to prevent burnout. She swims and cycles to de-stress.

She said: “Not knowing how long the journey is something quite difficult. We need to pace ourselves as it might be a very, very long marathon.”

Theresa Tan