

Coronavirus pandemic

Parents of newborn both had Covid-19

Couple cleared of virus just before son's birth; they flew here from London a month earlier

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Like all good stories, this one has something to do with time: two hours to be exact.

On March 19, Mrs Natasha Ling and her husband Pele boarded a night flight from London to Singapore, just two hours before she entered her 36th week of pregnancy when she would have been barred from flying.

"If we had missed that flight, we would now be stuck in London, and I'm not sure what would have happened," says the 29-year-old Singaporean speech and language therapist. As it turns out, a lot happened to her and her British church worker husband here. Barely three days after their arrival, both were diagnosed with Covid-19.

A month of fears, anxiety and uncertainty followed before their son Boaz arrived on April 26, quite possibly the first baby born in Singapore to parents who had Covid-19.

"The infectious disease doctors told us he's a super baby, a super Singaporean baby," says Mr Ling, 28.

Research and tests are yet to be completed but doctors also told the couple that all evidence and understanding of Covid-19 suggests Boaz could be the first Singaporean to be born with Covid-19 antibodies, although whether they confer life-long immunity is still being debated in the scientific community.

The couple, who celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary last month, had originally planned to have their firstborn in London, where they live.

But the coronavirus upended their plans. Their decision to fly to Singapore was also prompted by the rising numbers of Covid-19 cases in the United Kingdom, which now has almost 180,000 infections and nearly 28,000 deaths.

Friends told them they were crazy to get on a flight.

"But I just wanted to get to Singapore. I knew that once I was in Singapore, everything would be fine," says Mrs Ling, whose father is The Straits Times' Forum Editor Mathew Pereira and mother, a retired civil servant.

Getting a face mask before their trip proved even more difficult than getting their air tickets. The couple went to scores of pharmacies before they found just one, which cost £20 (\$35.40).

At Heathrow, the couple realised how dire the situation was.

"There were people wearing homemade hazmat suits, painting overalls and ski goggles. It was the weirdest flight ever. Natasha told me off because I was trying to take photos," Mr Ling recalls with a grin. His wife barely managed a wink on the 12-hour flight.

"I freaked out a bit because I was thinking: 'I'm sure someone on this plane must have it,'" says the former student of Singapore Chinese Girls' School who has a degree in speech therapy from the City University of London.

The thought that they might have the virus did not cross their minds but Mr Ling did feel under the weather. He had also lost his sense of taste and smell, although he did not know then that those were symptoms of Covid-19 infection.

"It'd been working all year producing a week of events for my church and that's suddenly been cancelled. I thought I was just feeling down."

Feeling relieved after clearing temperature checks at Changi Airport, the couple headed for her parents' new and as-yet-unoccupied home to serve their 14-day stay-home notice (SHN).

But their ordeal was not over; in fact, it was just beginning. The baby

was expected on April 17, and the couple barely had four weeks – for two of which they had to remain home-bound – to find an obstetrician. There was also the chance that Mrs Ling could go into labour during their SHN.

That night, Mr Ling went to bed with a slight fever. The next day, he consulted a general practitioner who sent him to the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) to get tested for the coronavirus.

After a nose swab and an X-ray, he was told to go home and wait for the results. At noon the next day, he was roused from his jet-lagged slumber by a call informing him he had tested positive. His wife broke down. An ambulance took him to the NCID.

"I felt I was in a scene in a film," says Mr Ling, who was also interviewed by a contact tracer. "Everyone was in hazmat suits. You're talking to people and you can see only their eyes. You have no idea whether it's a doctor, a nurse or a porter."

His first concern was for his wife.

"I told everyone: 'My wife is pregnant, she's pregnant. Can you tell my wife to come here?'"

Later that day, a terribly anxious Mrs Ling got herself tested and spent the night alone. Like her husband, she had lost her sense of taste and smell but displayed no other symptoms. The next day, the dreaded call came.

"When I got into the ambulance, they weren't sure where they were going to take me because I was so heavily pregnant. At first they told me I was going to NCID. That was a relief because then I would be with Pele. Then they said: 'We're taking you to SGH'. Then, it was KKH. They basically went down the list of public hospitals," she recalls.

Mrs Ling adds: "Obviously they had a patient with Covid-19 who was so pregnant. NCID didn't have maternity facilities so they needed to find a hospital where I could get maternity care as well. I was like: 'Do I have a say as to where I'm going?'" They said: 'I'm sorry, you don't.'"

She finally ended up at the National University Hospital (NUH). Tearful and frightened, she had to wait in the ambulance for 20 minutes before a group of masked men in protective suits whisked her off in a wheelchair.

"One was in front of me, one was beside me, one was pushing me and another group was shouting 'get out of the way, get out of the way' along the corridor. A lot of people were taking photos. It was funny even though it was horrible."

Warded in an isolation room for three days, she was overwhelmed by fear and helplessness.

"No one was communicating with me about what was going to happen. I felt everything was out of my control," she says.

She tried not to fret. "I was worried about getting worried because I was worried that if I worry, the baby would come sooner. My focus was on trying not to have the baby while testing positive," she says. If that happened, mother and baby would be separated immediately. "I was told: 'You're going to have this number of people in the room, they're all going to be wearing PPE (personal protective equipment), your husband will not be allowed to be there, the baby will be taken away from you as soon as he's born and he will have to test negative for seven days before you're able to hold him.'"

The reason is to avoid contact. According to the NCID, no traces of the virus have been found in placenta or umbilical blood in the studies it has reviewed. This suggests it is unlikely a mother can infect her child while it is still in the womb. Meanwhile, Mr Ling got himself



Left: Mrs Natasha Ling and her husband Pele with baby Boaz, who was born on April 26.

Below: At the National University Hospital, the couple were in opposite wards separated by a 2m-wide corridor. PHOTOS: MATTHEW PEREIRA, PELE LING



Left: Mrs Ling having her vitals checked at NUH. Above: Mrs Ling was in a ward with other male Covid-19 patients. He and his wife could look into each other's wards but could not cross the corridor. PHOTOS: PELE LING

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transferred to NUH after much wrangling. He was "reunited" with his wife only a few days later when they were placed in opposite wards with other Covid-19 patients.

"There were no doors so we could see into each other's rooms. We couldn't cross the corridor which was 2m wide but we could chat across it," says Mr Ling.

Because their circumstances were so unique, the couple were

given swab tests daily, instead of once every two days. Patients had to have two consecutive negative tests before they were declared Covid-19 free.

At about 10pm on her 10th day at NUH, Mrs Ling was told she had a double negative. Her husband recalls: "She stood across the corridor, in floods of tears, and she said: 'But I don't want to go home without you.' But I, and everybody else,

said: 'No, get out of here.'"

The next day, Mr Ling had his second consecutive negative and was discharged too. They were not out of the woods yet, though.

The gynaecological team at NUH told them that if, in the following five days, Mrs Ling were to go into labour, they were going to proceed as if she was still positive.

"They were still going to take the baby from her straight away. So the

race was on to get past those five days," says Mr Ling. Although they had planned to consult an obstetrician in a private hospital, they decided to go back to NUH.

"We had a chat with one of the doctors and she said: 'It would be really valuable to us to have you because we can do all this research and you can help other pregnant women and their babies,'" says Mr Ling, adding that they agreed to let researchers take their newborn's blood for research. "We were going through such a horrible situation and we didn't want others to go through it as well."

The five days came and went without incident, but another type of stress set in: the baby took its time coming. Hoping exercise would help expedite the process, Mrs Ling took to walking 6km in the Botanic Gardens each day. It didn't help so a week after the expected delivery date, doctors decided to induce labour.

Boaz, tipping the scales at 3.735kg, made his entrance at 4pm on April 26 and let out a lusty cry.

"Maybe we're a bit old-fashioned but we decided we didn't want to know the gender beforehand, and we wanted it to be a surprise. All the doctors and nurses found it a bit strange," says Mr Ling with a chuckle.

Moments later, the "miracle baby" was cradled against his mother's bosom, staring at her tear-stained face, oblivious to the drama surrounding his birth.

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