

Coronavirus Singapore

They're on the front line too

Besides doctors and nurses, other workers in hospitals have been under pressure amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Nadine Chua looks at their contributions and challenges



Mr Andy Tan (centre), NUH director of operations support services, with security officers Shanizar Abdul Majid and Nur Johan Amir. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Team converts NUH wards as Covid-19 ebbs and flows

In February last year, National University Hospital's (NUH) department of operations support services quickly converted normal wards into pandemic wards for Covid-19 patients.

The team's engineers, operational and security staff helped convert five general wards into pandemic wards. Three were reconverted to general wards subsequently, while two remained.

When the Covid-19 cases surged this year, the three general wards were again converted to pandemic wards. These wards house Covid-19 patients, and their conversion involves ensuring that the air supplied to and directed from it does not mix with that of other wards.

Twenty general rooms were also converted to isolation rooms last year, with three more converted this year.

Mr Andy Tan, 55, director of the operations support services at NUH, told The Sunday Times that it is imperative for the pressure regimes to be controlled in all isolation rooms. "This is to keep the Covid-19 virus contained and to prevent contaminants from migrating from the isolation room to the corridors or other areas of the hospital."

Under his supervision, engineers ensure that the air within an isolation room is extracted and cleaned by air filters.

Mr Tan, who joined NUH in November 2019, said ward conversions need to be done quickly and accurately. "Sometimes when

SWIFT ACTION

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MR ANDY TAN, on meeting the surge in Covid-19 cases.

there are more admissions, ward conversions are required immediately – even in the middle of the night. The situation is always fluid, so we need to be nimble and adapt quickly," he added.

Mr Tan manages about 200 staff in the operations support services department at NUH with eight team leaders. They help to escort Covid-19 patients from wards to treatment areas and ensure equipment in the hospital such as security systems and ventilators are working properly.

Acknowledging staff fatigue as the workload increases, Mr Tan said: "We ensure our staff are given time to recharge, whether it is in the form of short breaks during shifts or taking days off. I think this is important because the Covid-19 journey will be long, but I believe the team will get through it together."

Nadine Chua

Supervisors don PPE to help tackle surge in cleaning jobs

Ms Yeo Shu Ming, 26, an executive at the National University Hospital's (NUH) environmental services department, oversees general and biohazard waste disposals as well as requests for cleaning of wards and rooms.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic early last year, there have been 50 per cent more requests for terminal cleaning of general wards, isolation wards and intensive care units.

And the number of cleaning requests has almost doubled since the spike in Covid-19 cases in August, added Ms Yeo.

Terminal cleaning of a patient cubicle involves wiping down all surfaces, including the bed, furniture and walls. It is done after a Covid-19 patient is discharged and before a new patient is admitted.

Ms Yeo said: "One challenge is manpower shortage. Because of the recent surge in community cases, more of our staff are getting health risk warnings and isolation orders."

She said that in September, the manpower shortage was so keenly felt that team supervisors had to don personal protective

50%

Increase in cleaning requests for general wards, isolation wards and intensive care units since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic last year.

equipment and clean the wards themselves.

And during last year's circuit breaker in May, the external vendors the team worked with said they could not collect and dispose of the hospital's biohazard waste on time as members of their staff were affected by dormitory lockdowns.

Ms Yeo had to scour NUH for an appropriate, unused room to hold the waste to ensure it was safely kept away from patients and other healthcare workers while waiting for disposal services to resume.

But Ms Yeo said the team has learnt to deal with the unexpected.

She said: "We have been trained for this, and so we know what to do, and we do it because it is our job."

Nadine Chua



Environmental services executive Yeo Shu Ming supervising a member of the housekeeping team. The team's workload increased by half when the pandemic broke out last year, then doubled as cases rose in August. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM