Ten years ago this month, S’pore was gripped by the outbreak of Sars. For a few, the deadly virus devastated their lives. Two people share the great sacrifice they had to make.

**Gone but never forgotten**

JUDITH TAN

HIS was one of the most heart-rending stories to come from the Sars severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak a decade ago. Vascular surgeon Alexander Chan, then 32, had rushed back from Los Angeles (LA), where he was meant to be spending a well-deserved vacation with his wife. The date was April 15, 2003. "Even by now, all my colleagues had fallen to the viral attack. But until I arrived, I was supposed to run the medical surgery as he had been away; so that's why I stayed, to hold back tears." His wife, Associate Professor Koh Woon Puay, now 41, tells The New Paper on Sunday:

"Just four days before, he had persuaded me not to stand in Toronto to present a paper. There had been an outbreak of Sars and he was worried for my safety," she says, trying to hold back tears.

"I told him I was meant to be spending the four days of my vacation with him in LA. He told me that we should not be separated, that he would come home. I could see the hunger in his eyes. He was so hungry to be with me..."

"He told me he had rushed back from LA because he was worried about me. I thought: 'Why? I was not the one hips deep in infective Sars'."

"I couldn't tell him not to go, but quietly wished he wouldn't. I told Dr Chao, my husband, I was worried for my own safety."

"I thought I was going to fall asleep on the phone with him from LA."

"But on the morning of the day he died, Dr Chao's voice was very soft and faint, says Prof Koh."

"I would crawl up to him and he would feed me a tub of green tea ice cream."

"As his wife, I always supported his decisions. This time, I could not persuade him to a course of action."

"I told him I was not to, but quietly wished he did not do it."

"Prof Koh, then only 33, was robbed of her soulmate; her two young daughters, deprived of their father."

"The date was April 5, 2003. It was his birthday. He had the flu."

"I thought he was going to be fine – it was just a normal flu."

"But the flu did not go away."

"His voice was very soft and faint, says Prof Koh."

"I could hear the phone ringing in the apartment."

"I rushed back from the airport to LA, took the flight to Los Angeles (LA), and rushed back to Singapore..."

"I was 18m and I turned the key in the lock."

"I could hear the phone ringing in the apartment."

"I rushed back to the hospital, and found him on the bed."

"I could only say: 'I'm sorry'."

"He even had a bromide of an interview I did with Lianhe Zaobao on Alex framed and hung up in the bedroom. He wanted it for the girls."

"Wars can be geographically contained. Infectious diseases cannot - and in more devastated areas, not with a cardboard box."

"At home, I was in tears."

"I would cry."

"She says: 'We spoke on the phone – constantly – before he died."

"Our son Alex's 13th birthday was that day."

"I think we need a father but because you love him."

"It's because of my father."

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THEN & NOW

After getting infected, nurse thought:
‘I’m going to die’

For two weeks she could only watch office staff going home every evening from a window in her ward at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH).

This alone was enough to send Ms Noor Melati Ahmad spiralling into depression.

The then 22-year-old junior staff nurse was all alone in what was meant to be a four-bed ward. It was empty but for her, her bed and a television set.

She tells The New Paper on Sunday: “There was no human contact. I wasn’t allowed visitors. I missed my family, my boyfriend.

“Even the nurses kept their distance. When they delivered food, they would simply place it at the door and knock. I felt rejected, isolated, and the loneliness was overwhelming.”

It was April 2003.

Ms Noor Melati, now 31, had contracted Sars. She was quarantined lest she infected others.

She had only two years of nursing experience then and had been working at Ward 64 at National University Hospital (NUH).

She knew the seriousness of the outbreak, but did not realise its severity – not even when medical staff started using more extreme protection.

“We were first in scrubs and gloves. Then we progressed to masks and then to PPE,” she says.

PPE, or Personal Protective Equipment, is the specialised clothing, helmets, goggles and masks designed to shield healthcare workers from infection.

Then a patient came in – a 45-year-old vegetable wholesaler from Pasir Panjang market.

He was admitted to her ward on April 8, 2003. When he took a turn for the worse, he was transferred to TTSH.

He died four days later.

She says: “We took precautions and followed protocol closely. We wore PPE and were encouraged to shower before leaving the hospital.

“I believe I caught the virus while helping to pack the patient’s belongings to send them on with him to TTSH.”

The next day, her nurse manager called to inform her that she was to be quarantined.

“I felt disappointed. It was my day off the next day and I was looking forward to spending time with my boyfriend.”

“I told my mother and she was worried. I also called my boyfriend. He wanted to come but my parents refused to let him,” she recalls, tears brimming.

A few days later, Ms Noor Melati developed a fever.

“First it was 37.4 deg C and it climbed quite quickly to 37.8 deg C, then (it went) over 39 deg C the next morning. I was sent for an X-ray and then isolated, before being sent to TTSH,” she says.

She was not alone. A doctor was infected too.

“It was all over the news. When my mother watched it on TV, she knew it was me and cried,” she says.

“My symptoms turned very bad. I had fever, chills, rigor and was short of breath. No one pill could treat the infection so I had to take cups of medicine every day. I really thought this was it. ‘I’m going to die’.

“So I called my father. We had quarrelled over something trivial, and I didn’t speak to him for a whole year. But I was going to die so I sought his forgiveness.”

Ms Noor Melati says that feeling rejected and isolated by fellow nurses was much worse than the infection itself.

She says: “I was one of them yet they stayed away.

“My spiral downwards got so bad I didn’t have the appetite to eat. My food was mostly left untouched.

“But thinking back, the nurses were probably following directives. I don’t really blame them.”

Ms Noor Melati kept in touch with her family and boyfriend on the phone.

Months after her recovery, her sister revealed that her mother had cried every day.

Defying his parents’ wishes, Ms Noor Melati’s then boyfriend also sneaked into the hospital to try and see her.

She went on to recover.

She got engaged to her boyfriend on Valentine’s Day a year later. Today, they are proud parents of two little girls.

She says: “The month-long stay at TTSH and then at CDC (Communicable Disease Centre) was the longest ever. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

Ms Noor Melati, now an oncology nurse caring for cancer patients, says her Sars ordeal has taught her never to take a fever for granted.

“MyspiraldownwardsgetsobadI

“Dirty hands and fingernails are all it takes to spread germs,” she says.

“A fever, no matter how mild, is an indication that the body is fighting an infection. We must always pay close attention.”

– Judith Tan

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APRIL 8

Number of Sars patients: 157, with 37 probable, 74 suspect and 46 observation cases.

APRIL 11

Launch of the Courage Fund, offering financial relief to Sars victims hospitalised or quarantined during the outbreak.

APRIL 14

Secondary schools reopen.

APRIL 16

Primary and childcare centres reopen.

APRIL 17

The Ministry of Health announces plans to convert Ren Ci Community Hospital into isolation facilities in order to handle the next outbreak.

APRIL 20

Sars outbreak at Pasir Panjang Wholesale Market. It shuts for 10 days.

APRIL 22

SGH vascular surgeon Alexandre Chao dies from Sars.

APRIL 23

All departing passengers at Changi Airport have their temperatures checked by thermal imaging scanners before going through immigration.

MAY 7

First 40 container isolation rooms ready for operation.

MAY 11

Nurse Hamidah Ismail dies on Mothers’ Day.

MAY 18

One more Sars patient is diagnosed, dashing Singapore’s hope of being taken off the WHO’s list of Sars-affected areas.

He would be Singapore’s last Sars patient.

MAY 31

WHO declares Singapore Sars-free.