Medical social worker Diana Koh is no stranger to helping patients in need. Yet, it isn’t just patients who are of concern to her. The wellbeing of colleagues matter as well, so much so that the idea of a staff support system took root among the medical social work team of which she’s a part of. In 2006, the CARE Buddies programme, where staff are paired with colleagues to receive peer support when they are under stress, was set up.

The SARS threat in 2003 was a lesson that highlighted the importance of a culture of care. Diana recalls the training on psychological first aid they received. “It was useful as we learnt skills to cope with daily stress as well as during major crises.”

CARE Buddies, which is incorporated in NUH CARE (a psychological response system), started in high-risk areas like the emergency department and intensive care units, and was eventually extended to all wards and outpatient clinics.

Equipped to train hospital staff on Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), Diana, together with her team of medical social workers, conducted roadshows and met with department leaders to build on the culture of care in the hospital.

“The CARE Buddies system involves all levels of staff, from nurses to doctors, allied health and administrative,” she explains. “We put in networks for coverage and quick mobilisation structures, so that CARE Buddies and teams can be mobilised quickly during crises.” Currently, there are more than 600 registered staff who are CARE Buddies.

For Diana, her journey as a medical social worker for the last 30 years has been one of continuous learning. She counsels patients, visits them at home, and works with colleagues at NUH and partners in the community to ensure patients get the best possible care, and above all, are given the hope and will to carry on.

She recalls an alcoholic patient who required an organ transplant. “He fell into depression and had little social support. He almost lost the will to live, but after counselling and encouraging him over several sessions, I could see a change in him and eventually, he decided to go for his transplant. I was so happy he found a new lease of life.”

For Diana, it is her patients who make her work meaningful. “To aspiring medical social workers, remember that your patients are your best teachers; your core clinical skills will build as you journey with them.”

“Our patients are our best teachers”