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Madam Lim Gek Meng (third from right) with her son Goh Jun Le (in grey T-shirt) and consultants from the National University Hospital, National University Cancer Institute, Singapore and Ng Teng Fong General Hospital; (from left) Dr Eunice Tan, Dr Mark Muthiah, Dr Ho Jingshan, Associate Professor Glenn Bonney, Dr Raghav Sundar and Dr Gregory Heng. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Mum with colorectal cancer gets new lease of life with son's liver

60-70% of his liver cut out to replace his mum's in the first such transplant in S-E Asia

Clara Chong

Madam Lim Gek Meng's life was turned upside down in October 2020 when she was diagnosed with terminal colorectal cancer, which had spread to her liver. The 61-year-old's prognosis as a stage 4 colorectal cancer patient was grim – with chemotherapy, less than 20 per cent, or fewer than one in five such patients, survive beyond five years. Doctors at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital immediately put her on chemotherapy. She responded well to that, the standard treatment used for patients like her. The tumours shrank. However, Madam Lim, who is unemployed, still had tumours that

could not be removed by surgery. She also could not rely solely on chemotherapy as patients do develop resistance to the treatment, which would result in the cancer spreading, her doctors said in a media briefing on Friday. In April last year, Madam Lim was given a chance at a new lease of life by oncologists, liver transplant surgeons and colorectal surgeons from the National University Health System (NUHS). The experts picked her to be Singapore's first stage-4 colorectal cancer patient with liver disease to undergo a liver transplant from a living donor. The donor would be none other than her own 22-year-old son, Mr Goh Jun Le, an only child who is currently doing national service. Surgeons would cut out 60 per

cent to 70 per cent of Mr Goh's healthy liver and replace Madam Lim's cancerous liver with it. Before the transplant, doctors removed the one tumour left in her colon. On July 28 this year, Madam Lim successfully underwent liver transplant at National University Hospital's National University Centre for Organ Transplantation. Here was also the first such transplant in South-east Asia. There had been similar transplants in other countries, such as Norway and Finland. Professor Chng Wee Joo, director of the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore, said: "This success highlights a new treatment paradigm, where specific patients with stage 4 colorectal cancer who fulfil the necessary criteria may be candidates for liver

transplantation." With her transplant, Madam Lim's survival rate has markedly improved. She now has a more than 60 per cent chance of living for more than five years. She is now cancer-free for the first time since her diagnosis in 2020. Liver transplants are conventionally not recommended for stage 4 colorectal cancer patients whose disease has spread to the liver. This is because an organ transplant requires the immune system to be suppressed to prevent the body from rejecting the organ. This increases the risk of a cancer relapse. However, in the last two decades, studies have shown that liver transplant is possible with careful patient selection. A team from NUHS, led by Asso-

NEW HOPE

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PROFESSOR CHNG WEE JOO, director of the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore, who said liver transplants are conventionally not recommended for stage 4 colorectal cancer patients.

ciate Professor Glenn Bonney, a consultant at National University Hospital's division of hepatobiliary and pancreatic surgery, as well as international experts, formulated a way to select and manage these patients.

By coming up with a set of 44 stringent criteria, such as being responsive to chemotherapy, the team defined the specific stage 4 cancer patient profile that would make him eligible for a transplant, as well as the tests and care needed.

This comprehensive set of guidelines was published in the *Lancet Gastroenterology And Hepatology*, a leading medical research journal, in September last year.

Colorectal cancer is the most common cancer in men and the second most common cancer in women here. The risk of colorectal cancer increases with age and can be contributed by a lack of physical activity and a diet high in processed meats, as well as alcohol consumption.

More than 50 per cent of patients with stage 4 colorectal cancer have disease that has spread to the liver.

Unfortunately, these patients often have such large tumours in their livers that too little healthy liver tissue will remain if doctors are to remove the cancerous parts.

Hence the transplant offers such patients here new hope. Describing her ordeal, Madam Lim said she broke down in tears when she learnt of her diagnosis and worried about the limited time she had left to spend with her son.

"I am terribly grateful to all the doctors, nurses and even admin staff who have helped me in the last two years," said Madam Lim, who has recovered well and can do light exercises now.

Medical social workers are assisting her with financial support. NUHS did not reveal the full cost of the procedure.

On giving part of his liver, Mr Goh, who has also recovered, said: "She is my mother. I didn't have to think twice about it."

chongcjy@sph.com.sg