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Nurses go the extra mile



From left: Nurses from the community care sector Mirza Abdul Halim, 28, Casey Wong, 44, and Madeleine Lam, 30, have different stories as to how they came to work in the healthcare sector, but they share a firm commitment to service. PHOTO: GIN TAY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

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Nurses do not only work in hospitals but also in hospices and they may also go to patients' homes. Jasia Shamdasani speaks to three nurses in the community care sector ahead of Nurses Day tomorrow.



Jasia Shamdasani (mailto:sjasia@sph.com.sg)

FOLLOWING IN HIS MOTHER'S FOOTSTEPS

Many nurses choose the profession because their lives were touched by a nurse.

That was the case for palliative care nurse Mirza Abdul Halim, 28, who was inspired by his mother, a primary care nurse who worked at a polyclinic for over 20 years.

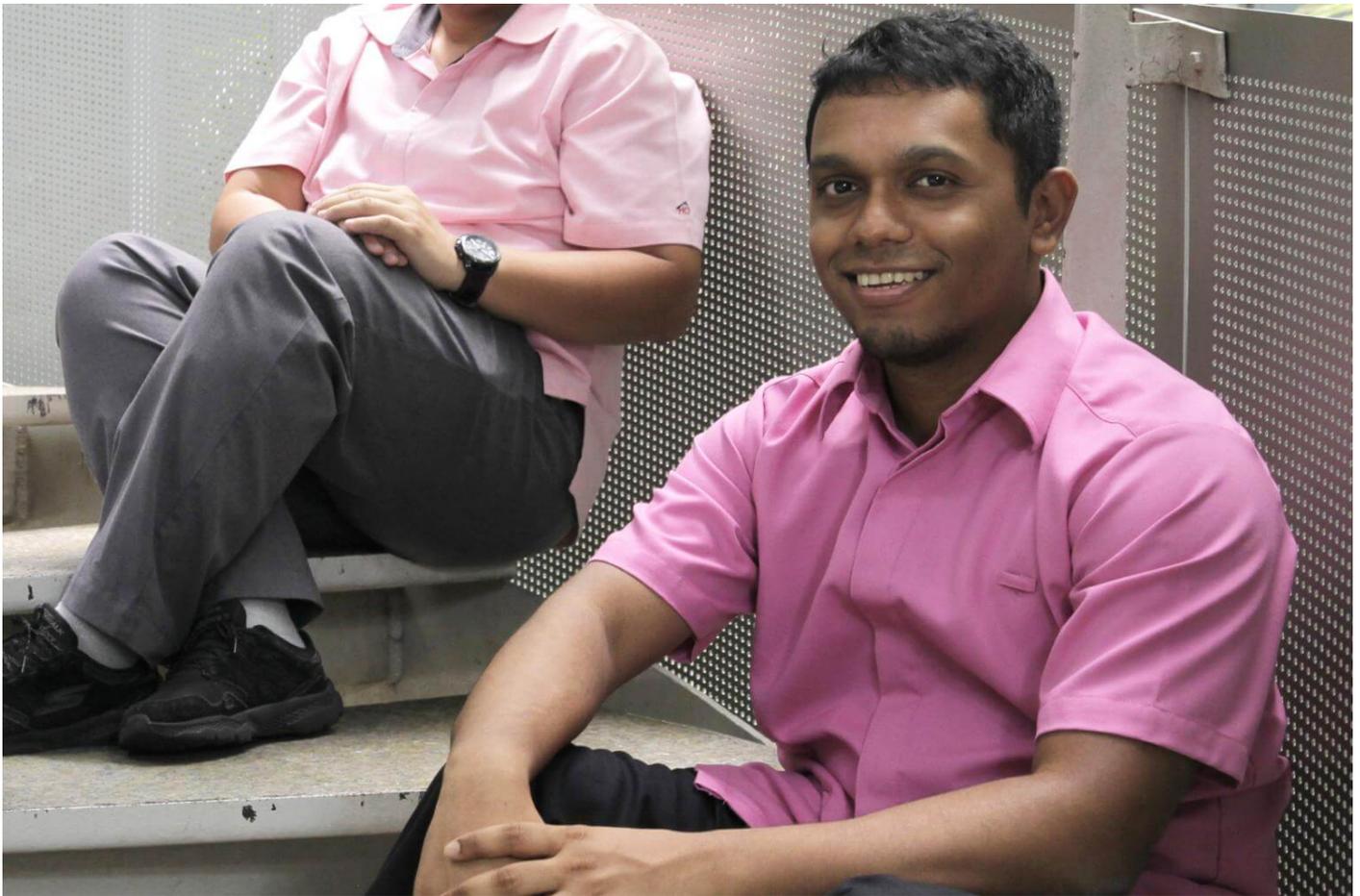
As a young boy, he would go to the polyclinic just to catch his mother in action. There, he witnessed her compassion in administering treatment and teaching patients about health matters.

Seeing how much good she did for others made him decide to go into nursing as well.

He pursued a diploma in nursing at Ngee Ann Polytechnic and worked part time with a private nursing agency after completing his national service in 2011.

During his stint with the agency, Mr Mirza was able to try out different roles in various healthcare institutions and settings. He realised his calling was in palliative care, so he joined the Dover Park Hospice full time in 2014.

"While it felt good to help those in need of immediate care in acute care settings, it felt incomplete for me as I did not know what became of the patients after they left the hospital," said Mr Mirza.



Palliative care nurse Mirza Abdul Halim was inspired by his mother, a primary care nurse whose compassion in administering treatment and teaching patients greatly impacted him. PHOTO: GIN TAY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

"In palliative care, I feel that the care I give centres on all the patients' needs, and not just those that help them with daily living. This led me to decide on palliative care and commit full time."

As a palliative care nurse, Mr Mirza takes care of patients who are terminally ill and do not expect to live long. It can be a difficult and emotionally draining job. "One of the challenges I face is to manage the day-to-day expectations of a family who knows their loved one is about to pass on."

He takes the time to reassure families that the symptoms their loved ones are facing will be managed as best as possible.

Mr Mirza, who is single, also trains other nurses in palliative care and is currently pursuing a part-time degree in nursing with Curtin University.

"While it is difficult, I see continuing education as a necessary sacrifice I have to make for this period of time as I know I have to improve myself and have a better understanding of my career," he said. His mother, he said, supports his career choice.

FROM STAMPING PASSPORTS TO PALLIATIVE CARE



Mr Casey Wong found a lot of meaning in being a senior palliative care nurse, a job that he decided to take on to learn more about caring for those with terminal illness. PHOTO: GIN TAY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

After stamping passports for two years as an immigration and checkpoints authority specialist, Mr Casey Wong, swapped his blue uniform for a nurse's whites.

"Nursing is a growing sector because of the silver tsunami," said Mr Wong, 44, who is a senior palliative care nurse at HCA Hospice.

To prepare for his career switch, he took up the Government's manpower professional conversion programme in 2005, which offered an accelerated two-year diploma in nursing at Nanyang Polytechnic.

"When I attended the programme, I almost wanted to quit, because it was really very tough," he recalled.

A hospital attachment changed his mind. "I found a lot of meaning in what I was doing, so I continued," said Mr Wong, who is single.

After graduating with a diploma in 2007, Mr Wong worked in a public hospital for seven years. But while he found the work meaningful, he faced many objections from his parents.

"My family didn't want me to go into nursing because they felt it was a dirty job looking after patients and cleaning up after them," he explained.

Mr Wong's mother began to see things differently when she became a patient at his hospital for an ailment.

In 2014, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and went to Dover Park Hospice. Mr Wong decided to learn more about palliative care. He was drawn to the work and the regular working hours, so he joined HCA Hospice.

But palliative care does not take place entirely in a healthcare setting, he said. "As a palliative care nurse, I also conduct homecare visits to patients to manage their pain and symptoms well so that they can be in the comfort of their home."

In his work, he develops a friendship with his patients and their families. "This is not something that you will experience in a hospital because the time nurses get to spend with each patient is short. The care they provide is also short-term and it ends when patients are discharged," he said.

"I have many friends who ask me why I don't feel sad to be in palliative care, but I always say that there is nothing sad about it as there is a lot of meaning behind it."

VOLUNTEER TRIP SPARKED HER INTEREST IN NURSING



Madeleine Lam was a teenager in Mongolia when she saw nurses rendering first aid to others, prompting her to start her nursing career in a general ward and intensive care unit in Singapore General Hospital. PHOTO: GIN TAY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

As a teenager on a volunteer trip to Mongolia to build homes, Madeleine Lam knew what she wanted to do with her life after seeing nurses in her team render first aid to others.

"After seeing them attend to team members who had fallen ill, I thought that if I had nursing skills, I would be able to use them to help the less fortunate," said Ms Lam, 30, now a homecare nurse.

She started her nursing career in a general ward and intensive care unit in Singapore General Hospital in 2011 before moving on to operational work, managing hospital licensing and accreditation matters.

In 2015, she returned to nursing as she enjoyed working directly with patients. She joined the Home Nursing Foundation as a full-time homecare nurse.



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Ms Lam visits a patient once or twice a month to once a week, depending on the care needed. In a day, she sees six to nine patients. Most require long-term care, which can stretch into years.

Patients usually pay for the care, although the foundation also gives financial aid to those who need it.

"Being a homecare nurse is gratifying because I get to look after patients right in their own homes, and I get to journey with them."

Homecare can be challenging. "The hospital tries to create a sterile environment but on a home visit, you don't know what the patient's home will be like... it may be infested with cockroaches or bedbugs, or it may be so cluttered you don't have space in which to do the procedure."

If a home is dirty, she will often contact a social worker to see if volunteers, or a cleaning service, can be found to come and clean it.

"You are responsible for your patient's health and you take charge of their healthcare needs, so you have more autonomy and empowerment, in a sense," she said.

Ms Lam, who is single, also started Project Light in 2015 to help overseas communities in need.

Every year, she joins a team of volunteer medical staff to countries like Thailand and Myanmar to provide medical care and health education to the less fortunate.

Project Light has gone on six overseas trips and is planning a trip in November to Nepal where medical consultations will be carried out.

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