

Cancer survivor volunteers at patient support group

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While other students typically take a gap year to travel or work overseas, Mr Shaun Lim was forced to take one after his first year in university when he was diagnosed with cancer in July 2019.

Since then, he has undergone two major operations and several cycles of chemotherapy for sarcoma, a rare but aggressive tumour that occurs in bones or the soft tissues of the body.

Mr Lim, 24, is still undergoing chemotherapy, but has been back in school since last August, and stayed in school despite a relapse.

The psychology student at the National University of Singapore, who is now in his third year of studies, is one of many cancer patients who are surviving the battle.

National Cancer Survivors Day, which falls on the first Sunday of June – June 6 this year – was established in 2005 to raise awareness of cancer survivors who continue to live life to the fullest. The theme for this year is “Nothing is impossible; I’m possible”.

Globally, cancer incidence has been increasing and is likely to continue to rise with an ageing population, says the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS).

However, cancer survival rates have also been improving, thanks to earlier diagnoses through screening measures, and improvements to treatment and post-treatment care.

The Singapore Cancer Registry, in a report released in March, said that the survival rate of cancer has risen from 53.1 per cent in the period between 2008 and 2012 to



Mr Shaun Lim, who was diagnosed with cancer in 2019, is still undergoing chemotherapy but finds the time to volunteer at a support group for adolescents and young adults.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SHAUN LIM

56.7 per cent between 2014 and 2018.

Support from family and loved ones is vital on a patient’s road to recovery, said Dr Teh Yi Lin, NCCS director of cancer education and information services, and associate consultant in the division of medical oncology.

But she also cautioned that encouragement and false positivity may sometimes come across as discounting the patient’s feelings.

She said: “Allow your loved one to express his or her feelings when they are comfortable to do so and reassure them that it is normal to feel down, worried or fatigued.”

Dr Teh added that patients may also struggle with a sense of loss, including of their place in society. In such cases, family members and loved ones are encouraged to help

the patients reintegrate into their usual routine, modifying it when necessary.

Mrs Cheryl Wang, 39, who works in the health and safety sector, said she is grateful for the support from her family and colleagues during her treatment and recovery.

A nodule was detected in her right lung after she signed up for a health screening in December 2018.

But she put off the doctor’s recommendation to go for further checks until mid-2019 due to work commitments.

The tumour was then found to be cancerous. She had surgery at the National Heart Centre Singapore and was diagnosed with stage two lung cancer in July 2019.

The illness meant a host of side effects from chemotherapy and be-

ing unable to attend her cousin’s wedding and go on family vacations, but Mrs Wang said she has much to be thankful for.

Her husband took on most of the load at home during her recovery, and her then three-year-old son was understanding of her condition and mindful of her surgery wound despite his young age.

She added that her colleagues were quick to shield her from high-risk duties when the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

Mrs Wang said: “In 2020, before the circuit breaker, my colleagues were activated to support the management of Covid-19 that carried risks of getting infected.

“My boss was aware that the risks of Covid-19 to me were higher than to my colleagues, so he decided to leave me out of those duties.”

She undergoes a computed tomography scan once a year, to check that her cancer has not reappeared. She said she is looking forward to many more celebrations – Children’s Day with her son, her birthday and Christmas.

As for Mr Lim, he is still plagued by many side effects such as nausea, vomiting and hair loss from his cancer treatment.

But this has not stopped him from continuing with his studies and even making time to volunteer at NCCS’ Adolescents and Young Adults Support Group, where he is helping to create new engagement and outreach plans for such patients.

“I’m up for more projects in the coming months as well, and I’m just excited to a part of something more than myself,” he said.

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