

A 'change agent' who has widened role of nurses

45-year-old from Alexandra Hospital among seven awarded highest accolade for nurses

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Becoming a nurse was not a profession Ms Margaret Lee Kwee Hiang, 45, had aspired towards when she was young, but she has managed to rise through the ranks to become chief nurse at Alexandra Hospital (AH), where she has transformed the nursing practice.

She started a system that allows nurses to take the lead in caring for certain groups of patients, such as those who are undergoing certain treatments, those in rehabilitation, and patients who are almost ready to be discharged.

Yesterday, Ms Lee was one of seven nurse leaders who received this year's President's Award for Nurses from President Halimah Yacob at a virtual award ceremony.

Since 2000, 84 nurses have been conferred this award – the highest

accolade in Singapore's nursing profession.

Madam Halimah said: "Beyond clinical achievements, many nominees also have a big heart in serving others in their community."

In her speech, she praised nurses for their "high level of dedication, determination and courage" amid the coronavirus pandemic, and called out the "abhorrent and unacceptable" harassment and abusive treatment that some nurses have received from people frustrated with Covid-19 measures.

In its press statement, the Ministry of Health (MOH) described Ms Lee, who started out as a staff nurse in 1996, as "an outstanding change agent in healthcare leadership today".

Last year, when Covid-19 measures led to restrictions in hospital visitorship, the mostly elderly patients at AH were left without caregivers by their side.

The immediate solution was to al-



low virtual visitations so that the patients would not feel isolated from their loved ones, she added.

Ms Lee, who has a master's in health sciences, is now piloting a project in which caregivers are involved in the patient's hospital care.

"The whole episode in the hospital is transient; it's to prepare the patient for the eventuality of a home setting," she told *The Straits Times*. This means even allowing the caregiver to stay overnight, as some patients do better when they have someone familiar by their side, she said.

Two other chief nurses were also awarded: Ms Christina Lim Poh Ying, 51, from Sengkang General Hospital, and Ms Lim Voon Hooi, 48, from National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, who have both

made notable contributions to nursing.

Two advanced practice nurses (APNs) also won the award.

The first, Dr Huang Fang, 54, became an APN in 2009. Since then, she has trained and developed eight more APNs in women's service at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

Dr Huang, who is now KKH's assistant director of nursing, obtained her doctorate in nursing practice in 2015 and can prescribe certain medications to patients, after having completed the 14-week prescribing programme that MOH introduced in 2018.

A certified traditional Chinese

Alexandra Hospital chief nurse Margaret Lee Kwee Hiang, 45, and six other nurse leaders received the President's Award for Nurses from President Halimah Yacob at a virtual award ceremony yesterday.

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medicine physician, she has also volunteered at the Singapore Chung Hwa Medical Institution.

The other APN award recipient, Ms Katherine Leong Shiao Pheng, 50, is assistant director of nursing at the National University Hospital's Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute. She is Singapore's first paediatric APN working in oncology, and has helped expand the role of paediatric APNs.

She obtained a master's degree at the National University of Singapore's Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies (NUS Nursing) in 2014 and has been an APN since 2015.

"I was 44 when I finally completed my studies... The greatest challenge for me was getting there, as I had to juggle being a wife and mother to two primary school-going boys," she said.

Another award recipient is Dr Shefaly Shorey, 42, an assistant professor at NUS Nursing. She was a teacher with a master's in biological science when she made the switch to nursing at the age of 25.

"Nursing was a calling I knew I wanted to pursue to help others, after seeing my grandmother battle

cervical cancer," she said.

"After getting my nursing diploma and while working as a registered nurse, I earned my Bachelor of Science (Nursing) degree and midwifery specialisation."

She went on to pursue a PhD at NUS Nursing in 2011.

The nursing award was also given to Mr Christopher Soh Kok Keng, assistant director of nursing at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's emergency department. In the early days of the Covid-19 outbreak, he led staff in setting up the screening centre at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases in just 24 hours.

Nurses form the largest professional group in Singapore's health-care workforce. As at the end of last year, there were more than 42,000 nurses registered with the Singapore Nursing Board, up from 36,000 in 2013. Around one-third of them are foreigners.

The President's Award is among schemes introduced to increase the recognition of nurses. Singapore is also working to improve nurses' prospects and raise their salaries, as it seeks to grow its local workforce due to the rising nursing needs of an ageing population.

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Ms Margaret Lee (right), pictured with nurse clinician Liu Huan (left) and senior staff nurse Wang Guangfo, started a system that allows nurses to take the lead in caring for certain groups of patients, such as those undergoing certain treatments and those in rehabilitation. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA