

MINISTRY OF HEALTH, SINGAPORE

BEHIND THE MASK

OUR HEALTHCARE STORY





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Information

IMPORTANT NOTICE
COVID-19

Dear Paramedics,
Please send patients with
Shortness of Breath/ COPD/
Asthma who require
resuscitation to ED
Observation Room directly.

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**BEHIND THE MASK:
OUR HEALTHCARE STORY**
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BEHIND THE MASK

OUR HEALTHCARE STORY



PHOTO: BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES/LAURYN ISHAK

MESSAGE BY DPM LAWRENCE WONG

STRONGER WHEN WE STAND TOGETHER

WE have spent three long years fighting COVID-19.

It was a journey with many twists and turns, and with repeated surprises and disruptions along the way. While our prior experience with SARS provided us a guide, COVID-19 turned out to be a far more formidable enemy. We had to be nimble and improvise our strategies, amidst a fast moving situation with incomplete information. In the end, our response to COVID-19 was by no means perfect. But we have much to be proud of. Our healthcare system, though strained, was never overwhelmed. We achieved one of the lowest COVID-19 death rates in the world,

and a vaccination rate that is amongst the highest in the world.

One important factor for this was the dedication of our frontline workers, especially our nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals. They worked tirelessly to see us through the crisis. Whether it was at our vaccination centres or foreign worker dormitories, whether it was in our clinics and hospitals or in quarantine facilities – they willingly assumed personal risks, over and over again, so the rest of us could be safe. They rose to the occasion when the going got tough, even in the darkest of times. We owe all of them a huge debt of gratitude.

What was also crucial was how our entire healthcare system rallied together to confront the crisis as one. When our public hospitals faced multiple surges in cases, the private and community hospitals stepped up to augment our capacity. Private laboratories and medical researchers also stepped up, working with our public institutions to roll out COVID testing on an unprecedented scale, and helping us make sense of the ever-changing situation.

This did not happen by chance. It reflects the tenacity, camaraderie,

and strength of leadership amongst the healthcare fraternity in Singapore – captured here in this book through personal stories and reflections across our healthcare system. More broadly, it reflects the strong foundation of trust in our society – trust in Government and in each other. It was this trust that held us together during the crisis, enabling each of us to do our part for the greater good.

We have learnt much from this experience and will take steps to better prepare ourselves for the next pandemic, including fortifying our public health system, enhancing our forward planning capabilities, and strengthening our resilience as a nation. Even as we do so, we must not forget the most important lesson of COVID-19: that we are stronger when we stand and work together. That is why we must continue to strengthen our collective bonds and stay united. Whatever the challenges ahead, we can overcome them as one people and one Singapore.

MR LAWRENCE WONG
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER,
MINISTER FOR FINANCE,
CO-CHAIR OF THE MULTI-MINISTRY TASKFORCE



PHOTO: MINISTRY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

MESSAGE BY MINISTER GAN KIM YONG

LESSONS FROM FIGHTING COVID-19

AS the crisis of a generation, COVID-19 brought unprecedented challenges for Singapore and the world. When the virus first emerged at the end of 2019, we expected it to eventually arrive in Singapore, but we did not expect the battle to last for three years. Looking back, our experience with COVID-19 has taught us three valuable lessons.

First, we must be nimble and flexible. No two pandemics are the same – we had initially thought that COVID-19 would be very similar to SARS, but this did not turn out to be the case. This meant that we had to quickly adjust our response, which was modelled based on SARS. With

very little information on COVID-19 early on in the pandemic, we also had to “feel the stones as we crossed the river”, and make decisions based on the data that we had at the time.

Second, the importance of transparency and trust. Our journey to living with COVID-19 would not have been possible without the high level of transparency and trust between the Government and the people. Even though we often had to make decisions on the fly and respond quickly to any change in situation, we made every effort to be frank and upfront, and explain the considerations behind our decisions. This transparency helped to build trust, mobilise everyone and ultimately, protect lives. Without this trust, many of the measures we had implemented during COVID-19 would not have been effective.

Finally, everyone in society has a part to play during a crisis. When the pandemic struck, our healthcare workers responded quickly despite not fully understanding how the virus spread or the risks it could pose to them as they cared for infected persons. Those in healthcare leadership positions went down to help out at the clinics and the hospital wards, standing shoulder to shoulder with those on the frontlines. When told to be prepared for

a prolonged outbreak, the healthcare fraternity took it in their stride and worked out a plan to stay at DORSCON Orange for a long period of time. Other segments of society stepped forward to help as well, such as the private sector who helped to set up our community care facilities and Singaporeans who provided meals to those in need or sewed reusable masks for the community. These shows of solidarity were heartwarming and inspiring.

On this note, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all frontline and healthcare workers for your tremendous dedication and sacrifice. Your hard work and perseverance has helped Singapore weather COVID-19 with one of the lowest fatality rates in the world, and it has been my privilege and honour to serve alongside you.

This will not be the last crisis we face. While we do not know when the next pandemic will happen, or what future crises may be like, we can be confident of and rely upon the Singapore Spirit – working with one another and looking out for each other, so that we can emerge stronger as a people and nation.

MR GAN KIM YONG
MINISTER FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY,
CO-CHAIR OF THE MULTI-MINISTRY TASKFORCE,
FORMER MINISTER FOR HEALTH (2011–2021)



FOREWORD BY MINISTER ONG YE KUNG

BATTLING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

OUR journey in transiting to endemic COVID-19 is hard fought. After more than three years of battling COVID-19, Singapore emerged from the shadows of the pandemic in early February 2023. The daylight that came after a long dark night would not have been possible without everyone who has contributed to this fight.

Through this crisis, I have developed utmost respect for my healthcare colleagues, for their immense courage, dedication and resilience during this difficult time. Our doctors and nurses, particularly, have borne the load of patient care under tremendous pressure over a prolonged period, when the emergency departments were constantly overcrowded with patients seeking urgent treatment – and they have stuck it out. I shared their huge sense of relief each time an infection wave subsided, and their anxiety on when would the next one come.

I'm also thankful to all Singaporeans, and everyone who lived in Singapore

during the pandemic, for doing your part. I know that the journey can be confusing and frustrating at times. But despite the twists and turns along the way, you have responded sensibly and responsibly to measures, and kindly to others in need.

Having the trust and support of fellow Singaporeans took much of the weight off the shoulders of the healthcare community in the thick of the battle. It was with everyone's cooperation and collective will that our healthcare system held up and healthcare capacity preserved.

This book is an effort to capture our healthcare story in battling a public health crisis. The experiences and insights from people in healthcare and our partners are invaluable in building a more robust and resilient ecosystem to tackle any future pandemics. From implementing the circuit breaker to containing the spread of COVID-19 in dormitories to rolling out a mass vaccination exercise and Home Recovery Programme, we accomplished what we never thought was possible during peace time.

As we remember what we have been through and our losses during the crisis, we also take stock of what we have gained and learnt. For instance, the pandemic has taught us how our resilience must not come just from adequate infrastructure, but also our collective understanding and action.

The crisis also pushed us to do or try new things, and catalysed

transformations that would have taken us years to accomplish previously. One aspect is preventive care. We became more conscious of hygiene, safe distancing and infection control; learnt to self-test, self-isolate and get ourselves routinely inoculated against the virus to stay safe.

Our GPs stepped up to become the first line of care, which paved the way for Healthier SG to be established as a major shift towards preventive health with primary care at the forefront.

The crisis also precipitated many other changes to strengthen our healthcare system for future pandemics, such as the setting up of a Communicable Diseases Agency and maintaining a permanent crisis operations force. Singapore may be at ease now, but we remain vigilant and stand ready to deal with future challenges.

This book pays special tribute to workers in healthcare who continue to provide tireless care to keep Singaporeans well and healthy. We remember the sacrifices of many who braved the fight where the battle was the fiercest at the frontlines.

I like to extend my heartfelt thanks to our healthcare workers for your invaluable contributions. I hope you will draw lasting inspiration from this book.

MR ONG YE KUNG
MINISTER FOR HEALTH,
CO-CHAIR OF THE MULTI-MINISTRY TASKFORCE



THANK YOU

WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

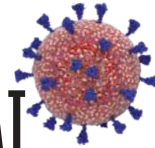
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THANK YOU

**TO
ALL**

**WHO CONTRIBUTED TO
SINGAPORE'S HEALTHCARE
EFFORTS AGAINST COVID-19**

BEHIND THE MASK



OUR HEALTHCARE STORY

After more than three years,
the virus has indelibly changed reality,
but what did it take to be able to see
the world with fresh eyes again?

This book chronicles the Ministry of
Health's coordinated response to the
COVID-19 crisis, from before the
first case was detected in Singapore
to a time when safe distancing and
masking up were no longer mandated.

It tells the lesser-known stories of
the people holding the fort in this
long-drawn battle: doctors, nurses, and
all the other workers in the healthcare
industry. Often hidden from the public
eye, but no doubt intertwined with our
lives, these are the narratives that have
laid the foundation for new beginnings.



Saw Swee Hock
School of Public Health