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# Frontline heroes and heroines

To be serving at the frontline of an outbreak of an infectious disease is to put oneself at risk. But the medical personnel who do so do it willingly and take the necessary precautions.

**AUDREY EDWARDS**

**N**URSE Shalizatulazua Shakdun briskly goes through the motions of demonstrating how she puts on the complete attire that keeps her safe during work.

First, she puts a blue gown over her dark blue uniform which has the words "ID Team" embroidered on the top left hand side of her blouse. "ID" here stands for "infectious diseases".

After the blue gown comes the white plastic gown which is followed by an N95 mask and plastic goggles.

Finally, to complement the cumbersome layers are the plastic head cover, which resembles a shower cap, special shoes and rubber gloves.

The 27-year-old nurse has been working at the Sungai Buloh Hospital isolation ward since the Health Ministry went on the alert, following the outbreak of the influenza A (H1N1) virus in late April.

Frontliners like her need to wear the personal protective equipment (PPE) whenever they come into contact with individuals who are under observation for the flu. Once they are done with the patients, the staff remove the PPE and take a shower.

A nurse for the past four years, Azua, as she is fondly known, is one of the 200,000 staff assigned to the frontline during this period.

There are 180,000 medical workers while the remaining are non-medical personnel.

Besides hospitals, they are also stationed at locations such as entry points.

Although Azua finds the PPE uncomfortable as "it can get rather hot because of the layers" she puts up with it twice daily for safety reasons.

This is not the first time Azua has come face-to-face with an outbreak. The first incidence was last year during the avian flu scare that broke out in Kampung Paya Jaras Hilir near Sungai Buloh but no one was found to be infected.

"Although I was still a little nervous this time around, I felt the avian flu episode had given me the experience I needed," she shares. The day for the doctors and nurses at the ward is divided into three shifts beginning 7am.

"My husband has not nagged me because I have explained the A to Z to him. Initially, he was a bit uncomfortable but now he understands."

There are 12 nurses who work under the supervision of Sister Asmah Osman.

The serious-looking 54-year-old says she has grown used to working under such situations.

"It is completely different from normal times. You have to wear the PPE to ensure that you don't get infected or infect others. I remind my nurses that there are others too working in such an environment, like those in X-Ray and the labs."

Asmah maintains a stern demeanour when she is at work, a trait that she says is necessary to ensure that nothing goes wrong.

Contact with patients normally happens when meals are served and when they accompany doctors on their rounds.

Once medical staff enter the ward, they are not allowed to leave until their shifts end.

## Proud to serve

Asmah, who was also involved in the same avian flu team last year as Azua, says she is proud to be given a chance to serve in such situations.

"I am willing to do it. Not everyone can get to work here," she says with a tinge of pride in her voice.

"I want to help. Besides, I believe that if you do a good job, God will reward you."

Her daughter, who lives with her, understands that it is a job that needs to be done.

As for the doctors, there are three medical officers and six specialists on call.

For Dr Low Lee Lee, it is her first time to be "actively involved" in the job.

This includes taking the patient's history, examining the individual and obtaining swab samples to be tested at the Institute for Medical Research (IMR).

"This is the time to get experience. If not now, then when? Besides, I have my *sifu* (mentor) like Dr Christopher Lee here," says the 34-year-old infectious diseases specialist.

She is always cautious in taking the necessary steps to protect herself.

"It is about being well prepared by wearing the gown and mask properly. You cannot rush; you need to follow the steps, only then can you help other people."

The bespectacled doctor adds that she helps her parents overcome their anxiety by telling them what exactly she is dealing with.

"I chose this career path. They may not understand why I chose it and not something more glamorous like cardiology. But they are okay with it (infectious diseases)."

To her, treating patients with infectious diseases like HIV is more rewarding.

"It is different because they feel that the doctor has come in and taken a risk to help them. I get phone calls and cards from them too," she says.

Her friends who are not in the medical field find her dealings with the current A (H1N1) flu "glamorous".

"Some e-mail me while others SMS me asking if I am still alive," she quips.

She explains that it is important to plan the day ahead, including how many times she sees a patient as one meeting is considered an "exposure".

"But I am willing to take the risk," she says.

The Sungai Buloh Hospital is one of 28 hospitals which have been identified as quarantine centres should there be a widespread outbreak.

At the isolation ward, patients are admitted into separate rooms and there are other facilities like a negative pressure room.

There are also rooms with two or four beds, in the event couples or families are admitted.

Dr Lee, the infectious diseases head at the hospital, says there are two important components to having staff work in such a ward: training, and proper equipment like the PPE.

In terms of the PPE, he says there is no problem as there is a ready stockpile.

For training, he says, it is important not only to train staff members but also to have retraining to

"refresh" them.

It is also important to keep each other's space clean.

Team work, he stresses, is important because staff can remind each other in case they have forgotten to take a certain precautionary measure.

"The biggest responsibility is not the technical part of things but to be emotionally prepared to serve." He should know, having been involved during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak a few years ago.

There was fear back then, as some frontliners had died in Hong Kong.

Even now, he adds, it is important not to be lax as one is still unsure how the scenario would play out.

His team consists of both senior and junior people and those used to serving in infectious diseases wards.

#### Addressing fears

"I also help to address fears that families might have about their loved ones working in the ward. We had a chat with the husband of one of the medical officers who was anxious about his wife," says Dr Lee.

The hospital receives patients when they are screened at entry points like airports and are found to have symptoms like fever.

An ambulance then transports them to the hospital where they are brought to the emergency department for triage and subsequently

sent to the isolation ward for further treatment.

Some people have also been reported to voluntarily go to the hospitals for check-ups upon exhibiting symptoms after returning from affected countries.

Passengers who have been issued health cards also turn up at the hospital if they display symptoms like fever within seven days of leaving an affected country.

Health Ministry director-general Tan Sri Dr Ismail Merican says his ministry staff are used to dealing with such scenarios.

"However, there must not be any lapse of security at any time. They must be careful not to spread any disease." He reminds all involved that it is important not to rush things like wearing the N95 mask and that the PPE could only last between six and eight hours.

"Assume that it is the worst-case scenario because we cannot afford any lapse in judgment. There will be a lot of pressure on them and they have to be resilient."

A meeting was held last Monday with various experts that included state health department directors, hospital directors and representatives from IMR, the Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia and Malaysian Medical Association where they were told to take their jobs seriously.

Frontliners should be cool, calm, civil and have good PR skills when dealing with patients, says Dr Ismail.

"To lose their cool could result in a breach. It is in times of crisis that you see who are the diamonds and who are glass. What they do makes a difference between life and death."

He says preparation for possible flu outbreaks did not start overnight, and Malaysia has in the last three years drawn up the National Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plan.

Dr Ismail says that if the disease hits Malaysia, the staff would not be allowed to leave their workplace.

"I am very proud of the staff. They never complain but come forward to serve. They know the score," he says.



**Dedicated:** Sister Asmah (left) and Azua explaining their roles as frontline personnel against disease outbreaks.

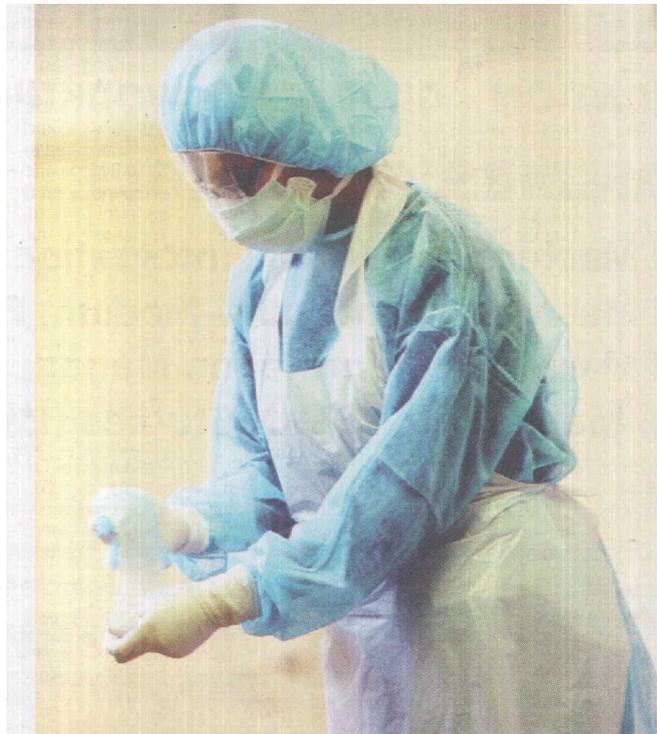


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**Taking precautions:** Azua putting on another layer of the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).