

## Communicating in a crisis | How to support staff through a pandemic

Changi General Hospital, Singapore

### What was the challenge?

Changi General Hospital (CGH) is a public acute teaching hospital with over 1,000 beds. It is the only general hospital in the Eastern part of the island city of Singapore and it serves a community of more than 1 million people. CGH has 5,500 staff and is a member of Singapore's SingHealth cluster, which is a network of acute hospitals, national specialty centres, community hospitals and polyclinics. CGH detected its first COVID-19 positive case on 7 February 2020. Since then, the hospital has treated 1,381 COVID-19 patients. This has been achieved with only 1 case fatality and no nosocomial infection of staff or patients.

In early April 2020, Singapore noticed a high transmission rate among migrant workers (MWs) and gazetted all MW dormitories as isolation facilities. CGH was tasked to deploy medical teams to provide primary care and vital signs monitoring at the dormitories, as well as teams to perform swab and serology tests for the MWs. Deployed CGH staff performed 8,700 COVID-19 swabs for migrant workers, as part of nationwide mass testing operations in MW dormitories.

### What was the task?

#### 1. Creating a sense of shared purpose

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, infection control measures (e.g., segregated eating areas, split team arrangements, no mixing of clinical staff between wards and work from home arrangements etc.) meant that staff could not socialise and bond as they normally would. This, in addition to the new stresses of an increased workload and being at risk of exposure to COVID-19, posed challenges to staff cohesion and togetherness, which could have been detrimental for staff, with implications to patients and the institution too. In order to rally all staff members towards a common goal, CGH's internal communications have emphasized a shared purpose by reiterating the hospital's vision, mission and values statements. This has helped to remind staff that we are in this fight together as "ONE CGH" – and amidst a rapidly evolving and uncertain environment, we are anchored by our vision, mission and core values.

#### 2. Supporting and encouraging our staff

CGH staff have had to adapt to increased workloads, longer hours and significant changes to their daily workflows due to COVID-19. Some administrative staff have even been deployed to support external clinical operations, pushing the boundaries of their comfort zones. Our frontline staff have been at increased risks of exposure to COVID-19, with potential risks of spread to their loved ones.

CGH's support was communicated to staff through tangible means, such as deploying additional manpower to areas with significant increases in workload, ensuring adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for all staff who need them, accompanied by training on appropriate use of PPEs. Encouraging messages, which consistently conveyed care and empathy, have also been employed to ensure staff feel individually supported by the institution. Staff have been offered psychological support through the distribution of gifts, display of encouraging messages and the availability of psychological support hotlines.

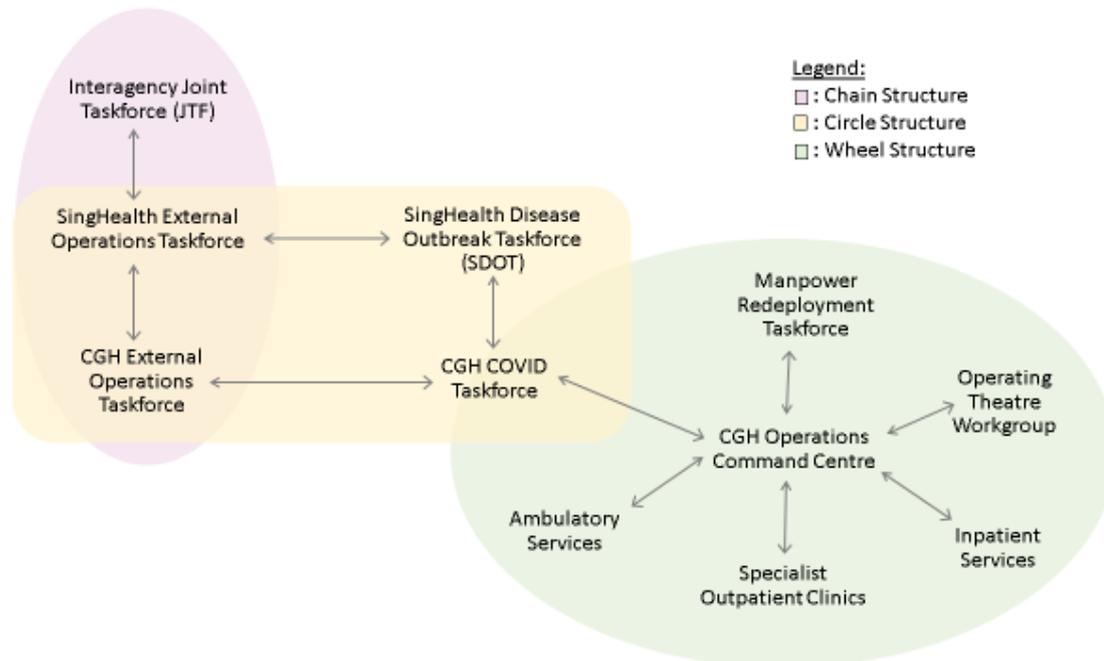
#### 3. Clarity of communications

With the initial uncertainty surrounding SARS-CoV-2 infectivity and COVID-19 disease severity, mainstream and social media sources were sharing different and sometimes conflicting information about the pandemic. If

unaddressed, this could have led to rumours and speculation among hospital staff, generating unnecessary fear and panic. Therefore, a communication structure was needed to facilitate quick two-way communication between stakeholders, including CGH staff, to ensure that clear and accurate information was relayed to all staff. A hybrid command and communications structure was formed among national-level, cluster-level and institution-level taskforces, comprising smaller subunits, each with their own command structure (e.g., centralised “wheel” structure, decentralised “circle” structure). This hybrid structure has shaped communications among national-level, health cluster-level and institution-level taskforces.

The command and communications structure within CGH, and how it interfaces with that at the SingHealth cluster and national levels, are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Command and Communications Structure for COVID-19 Response



Within the hospital, the “wheel” structure has facilitated a streamlined, two-way communication channel between senior management and staff. Once C-suite members on the CGH COVID taskforce make key decisions, relevant information is quickly disseminated to all hospital staff via CGH’s Operations Command Centre, which acts as the main node of communication within the hospital. Once staff on the ground implement measures, the same “wheel” structure facilitates quick relaying of feedback from the ground to senior management in the CGH COVID Taskforce.

## What was the action?

### 1. A shared purpose

CGH CEO sends weekly email memos to staff, summarising the current state of affairs in CGH’s fight against COVID-19. His messages are transparent, authentic, reassuring and encouraging. He consistently references the hospital’s mission, vision and values in his emails, to remind staff that their work is in pursuit of a shared goal. This has been done consciously to rally staff together, improve morale and to maintain cohesion within the institution.

CGH’s Communications department has also put together inspiring narrative series on COVID-19. Based on interviews with staff involved in external or hospital-based operations, “Face off as ONE CGH: Our Stories” and “COVID-19 – Walking the Ground” were created to showcase different aspects of CGH’s fight against COVID-19. Photographs with short interview excerpts capture staff’s day-to-day experiences in their respective roles, including the discomfort that many staff members have endured (e.g., caring for COVID-19 patients while perspiring in full PPE). This fosters mutual understanding and appreciation of how the roles and sacrifices of various staff members contribute to CGH’s overall response to COVID-19. It also showcases

how staff are contributing to CGH's shared mission ("To deliver the best patient care with passion and empathy"), by putting CGH's values ("Teamwork, Ownership, Professionalism") into action.

## **2. Supporting and encouraging our staff**

Support and encouragement for CGH staff has taken on various forms and originated from various sources. Manpower support was rendered through internal staff redeployment, amidst the differential change in workload across hospital services due to COVID-19. Staff from services with decreased workloads (e.g., due to the postponement of elective services) were redeployed to services with increased workloads (e.g., Emergency Department, Respiratory Medicine etc.). This helped to balance workloads between services least hit and worst hit by COVID-19. Temporary staff were also recruited to augment existing staff.

For staff who are caring for suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases, an adequate supply of PPE has been provided for their use, accompanied by the relevant training. As such, staff have the reassurance that they are properly equipped to perform their duties without being unnecessarily exposed to the virus. This was achieved by tapping on existing stockpiles, which are resupplied in a timely manner by our national procurement agency.

As part of the effort to support staff, CGH CEO's regular dialogue sessions with staff and Head of Departments (HODs) have proceeded, albeit virtually. During these dialogue sessions, CEO offers words of encouragement and takes feedback directly from staff on all matters, thereby offering assistance and support to staff. For staff who prefer a less public platform to offer their feedback, a "Staff Voices" email account is available for staff to utilize.

Recognizing that the increased stress amidst the COVID period can take a toll on staff's mental health, CGH's Trauma Recovery and Corporate Solutions (TRaCS) department, which is staffed by trained counsellors, has made psychological support hotlines available for all staff.

When members of the public express their support for healthcare workers in tangible forms (e.g., flowers and cards), the hospital employs a "tsunami" model of communication, displaying these gifts throughout the hospital and distributing them to staff in "waves". This ensures that staff feel constantly acknowledged and appreciated by the public. The hospital's Corporate Affairs department has been liaising with all donors to receive appropriate gifts and in-kind donations, while the Patient Experience Transformation (PXT) department has been coordinating the subsequent distribution of these gifts to hospital staff.

## **3. Clarity of communications**

To facilitate quick and clear dissemination and collection of information within the hospital, communication occurs varied modes and platforms, including daily operations emails, in-person briefings by HODs, virtual CEO dialogues, creative posters and phone messaging chat groups.

For example, in its daily email operations memo to staff, the CGH Operations Command Centre shares updates on COVID-19 case definitions and the latest figures of COVID-19 patients admitted to CGH. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, when case definitions, case numbers and guidelines on COVID-19 were evolving rapidly, these daily emails allowed staff to get clear and timely updates on the latest public health information.

To ensure that staff keep abreast of the latest safe distancing guidelines, CGH has also designed and displayed educational and eye-catching posters around the hospital using a "tsunami" model. Reminders to staff to comply with the safe distancing measures (e.g., log their temperatures twice daily, and use the national digital check-in system "SafeEntry" when entering and exiting the hospital) are displayed around the hospital in "waves". This has ensured that staff stay engaged by the refreshed designs, so that the messages conveyed are memorable and effective. For example, a "3 Musketeers" campaign has been launched to remind staff to participate in the 3 key contact tracing measures within the hospital: 'SafeEntry' (a national digital check-in system), 'TraceTogether' (a community-driven contact tracing app), and an institution-based

twice-daily temperature log system. By using the familiar motif of the 3 Musketeers, the posters help staff to remember all three measures, as they instinctively remember that there are three forms of action to be taken. Multiple poster designs have been prepared and kept in store, so that new “waves” of posters can be immediately printed and released, whenever there are changes to the safe distancing guidelines.

### **What were the results?**

CGH’s excellent COVID-19 outcomes have been a testament to the clear, effective and efficient two-way communication between senior management and staff, which have enabled swift and timely implementation of responses on the ground. As of 31 July 2020, 1,381 COVID-19 patients have been admitted and treated at CGH, with only one case fatality. This translates to a low Case Fatality Ratio (CFR) of 0.07%, which has contributed to Singapore’s low CFR of 0.05%.

As part of efforts to support staff, around 30% of staff were either redeployed to other areas within CGH or deployed for external operations, at some point of time. Despite this massive redeployment exercise, there have been no nosocomial COVID-19 infections within CGH. Furthermore, there have been no nosocomial COVID-19 infections among CGH staff deployed to external operations. These have been testaments to CGH’s effective manpower redeployment, adequate provision of PPE and training for staff, as part of the hospital’s effort to support staff.

CGH has received well-wishing cards and posters (e.g., drawings by preschool children) from over 70 organisations or individuals, and in-kind donations (e.g., food boxes and snacks) from over 200 organisations or members of the public. These tokens of the public’s appreciation have been very well received and appreciated by CGH staff.

The creative posters on safe distancing guidelines have proven a hit with CGH staff. In terms of education and retention of safe distancing guidelines, the “tsunami” model of communications has been very effective. According to data collected by CGH’s Safe Distancing Office (SDO), the percentage of staff who adhered to safe distancing measures increased drastically, from 60% to 94%, after the implementation of this “tsunami” model. Furthermore, many staff have expressed appreciation for these efforts and have commended CGH’s PXT department on the ingenuity of their campaign.