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Seeing her patients make a full recovery after their medical procedures is what makes Ms Azra's job worthwhile. PHOTO: TED CHEN

A heart for patient service

Nothing brings Ms Nur Azra Fakhira more joy than being part of her patients' journey to recovery

BY CHERYL LEONG

Ms Nur Azra Fakhira considers herself an introvert. But that did not stop her from choosing a career that requires her to interact with others on a daily basis.

A part-time stint as a ticketing host at Sentosa in 2013 helped Ms Azra come out of her shell and realise that she enjoys meeting people.

Today, the 27-year-old is a senior patient service associate (PSA), who is looking forward to the opening of Woodlands Health Campus — a fully-integrated facility combining an acute and community hospital, specialist outpatient clinics, and an intermediate and long-term care facility — in 2022.

Until then, she will continue to work at Admiralty Medical Centre's Eye Centre, where her duties include conducting visual acuity tests for patients, assisting doctors during consultations, providing financial counselling and coordinating follow-up appointments.

But that is not all there is to the job, says Ms Azra, who wants people to know that being a PSA is more dynamic than they think.

"We're among the first faces patients see when they visit the clinic. They are often nervous — especially if it's their first appointment — so it's up to us to relieve some of that anxiety by making them feel welcome, assisting them where we can and showing them care and concern."

"For example, I always make eye contact with patients and smile to

try and look approachable. I'll also tell them to take care when they're leaving the clinic. Patients appreciate these small gestures."

Lessons in empathy and compassion

Being a PSA requires patience and sensitivity — qualities of which Ms Azra has developed since she first joined the healthcare industry as a PSA with the National University Heart Centre in 2014.

Her gentle, compassionate nature also endears her to her regular patients, some of whom she has grown to regard as family. Seeing her regular patients recover from their ailments is what she finds most meaningful about her work.

"When I'm assisting the doctors during consultations, I'm also learning about the patients' conditions. It almost feels like I'm journeying with them from their first appointments, to their treatments and follow-up visits," she says.

"At the Eye Centre, I've seen patients' vision improving from 6/60 (being able to read only the big numbers on the eye chart) to 6/9 and even 6/6.75 (perfect vision would be 6/6) after their cataract operations, and I'm always very happy for them."

It has been over six years since Ms Azra became a PSA and her enthusiasm shows no signs of waning. She hopes to become a team leader and mentor to her juniors in the next few years.

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MS NUR AZRA FAKHIRA,
senior patient service associate
Woodlands Health Campus

What would be her first piece of advice to them?

"Build up a good support system at work, and always remember that tomorrow will be a better day," she says.

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Being a pillar of support

At the National University Polyclinics, senior medical social worker Audrey Hii counsels patients and their families and directs them to appropriate community care resources



Offering practical advice and emotional support to a patient is part of Ms Hii's job as a senior medical social worker. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY POLYCLINICS

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The 1,800-bedded Woodlands Health Campus (WHC) is a purpose-built Campus comprising a fully integrated acute and community hospital, specialist outpatient clinics, and intermediate and long-term care facilities. It is slated to open progressively from 2022.

WHC aims to reinvent the way care is delivered by breaking organisational and process boundaries - to provide seamless integration of care within and beyond hospital walls. We will achieve this by leveraging SMART technology to enhance care within the hospital, and extend the reach of our healthcare professionals into the community. Work has already begun at our pre-operations wards to test innovation and user-friendly solutions for inpatient care, emergency medicine, pharmacy, logistics and the community.

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BY MICHELLE CHIN

Giving practical advice and offering emotional support to patients and their family members is part and parcel of Ms Audrey Hii's job as a senior medical social worker.

This aspect of her work helps patients who may have emotional issues or face challenges coping with lifestyle adjustments due to their medical conditions, such as diabetes and dementia, and also supports their family members who may suffer from caregiver stress as a result.

In addition, the 38-year-old collaborates with government and social service agencies, as well as navigates through complex policies and resources, to support patients to receive help for their financial, employment and accommodation needs.

For instance, she links patients up with the Financial Counselling Services team to request financial assistance to pay for polyclinic medical bills, and does home visits to reach out to bed-bound patients who are unable to visit the polyclinics.

Understanding patients' needs

Together with other healthcare providers such as doctors, nurses and allied health professionals, Ms Hii works in the primary care setting to care for patients. Primary care professionals, who are often the patients' initial point of contact in the healthcare system, provide them with holistic and personalised care.

She divides her time between Jurong Polyclinic and Queenstown Polyclinic which are part of a network of clinics known as the National University Polyclinics (NUP).

Before joining the healthcare sector, Ms Hii, who has a bachelor's degree in counselling psychology with honours from Universiti Malaysia Sabah, worked as a social worker at a family service centre.

For about six years, she handled issues related to marriages, parenting, family conflicts and mental health during her work there. While working at the family service centre, Ms Hii also pursued a Graduate Diploma in Social Work from Singapore University of Social Sciences (formerly known as UniSIM).

I enjoy a rewarding career and it takes a specific mentality to be able to understand disease journeys and how they affect the body, and then to connect them to patients' day-to-day challenges.

MS AUDREY HII, senior medical social worker, National University Polyclinics

Later on, when she was working at NUP, Ms Hii pursued a Graduate Diploma in Counselling Practice from Counselling and Care Centre.

The difference between her past and current job is that she now attends to patients who also suffer from medical issues, on top of emotional or mental ones.

She says: "Having an illness contributes additional stress to a family that is already in crisis; it impacts family relationships emotionally, physically and financially."

"I enjoy a rewarding career and it takes a specific mentality to be able to understand disease journeys and how they affect the body, and then to connect them to patients' day-to-day challenges."

Difficulties arise when community resources are limited, and patients have to undergo means-testing to ascertain if they qualify to receive help.

In such cases, the wait for an answer can be frustrating for the patients and their families. But she does not give up hope to look for alternative solutions.

This is where Ms Hii recognises that building relationships and rapport with others is as important as understanding patients' challenges.

After all, medical social workers need to be open to networking with others in the community to find the best help possible for patients and their families.

Bukit Panjang Polyclinic, which is managed by the National University Polyclinics, is on a recruitment drive before it opens later this year. Graduates with social work qualifications accredited by the Singapore Association of Social Workers are welcome to apply. Visit www.nup.com.sg for more information.



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