

Son inspires dad to start mask donation drive

Close to 15,000 surgical masks will be donated by dentists to various nursing homes in Singapore by the end of the month.

The donation drive, known as Dentists No Masks, has the support of over 150 dentists and aims to help shield the elderly against Covid-19.

It was organised by Dr Tan Peng Hui, 55, after he realised that many dentists used fewer surgical masks during the circuit breaker period, as they provided only emergency treatment.

Having used just one N95 and one surgical mask during a whole week, Dr Tan, who specialises in root canal treatment, realised his extra stash of masks could be donated to homes for the elderly, previously sites of several infection clusters.

He rallied colleagues and friends within the dental industry. A nationwide mask collection began on May 5 and within 10 days, close to 15,000 masks were received.

A website (www.dentistsnomasks.com), set up in support of the initiative, provides updates on the number of masks donated and acknowledges donors involved in the drive.

Each donor is expected to donate at least one box containing 50 masks. Those interested in participating can contact Dr Tan through the website for more information.

"Many dentists are often well stocked with surgical masks. It's part of our hygiene practice to wear a mask when attending to patients and we change them at least twice daily or whenever we come in contact with patients who may have oral infections," said Dr Tan.

So far, 12,000 masks have been donated to 17 voluntary welfare homes. Another 5,000 masks will be personally delivered by Dr Tan to three more welfare homes during phase two of Singapore's post-circuit breaker reopening.

"I made a list of (about) 20 volunteer-run welfare homes, which are smaller in size and may not have as many resources as (the) larger organisations," explained Dr Tan.

On June 5, the first batch containing 500 masks was couriered to Dover Park Hospice, which is home to at least 26 elderly residents.

Ms Chin Soh Mun, director of nursing at Dover Park Hospice, said its usage of surgical masks has increased significantly amid the Covid-19 outbreak, with clinical staff required to change their masks every four to six hours or whenever their masks are wet.

"The masks donated by kind individuals and organisations have helped in alleviating the costs of acquiring more masks for the hospice, especially during this pandemic," she added.

When asked what inspired him to organise the donation drive, Dr Tan said it was in fact his son, 21-year-old Caleb Tan, who volunteered with the Ministry of Health for six weeks during his school holidays over April and last month.

Working 12-hour shifts on alternate days, the third-year medical student at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine helped coordinate the transport of Covid-19 patients to the relevant hospitals, isolation or recovery facilities and he arranged temporary accommodation for suspected cases.

"I tried to fetch him after each shift," said Dr Tan, "I remembered the first two nights where I waited for over two hours before he could leave work, since April was a busy and critical period.

"But it was in those moments I realised that I should do something of my own to help the fight against Covid-19 and that's when the idea of the mask donation drive struck me."

Every year, Dr Tan looks forward to receiving his Father's Day card – his "report card" for the year.

"Filled with drawings, photos and writings, the card never fails to make me laugh, cry and feel guilty at times, but I'm always thankful," said Dr Tan.

"This year, Father Day's will be extra special because my son and I joined the fight against Covid-19 together."

Cheryl Tan



Dentist Tan Peng Hui, who rallied those in the dental industry to donate masks to nursing homes, with his son Caleb, a medical student who volunteered his help in the Covid-19 fight. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAN PENG HUI