



The Covid-19 Chronicles, a series of thrice weekly informational comic strips, is popular for its bite-sized content and often humorous dialogue. PHOTOS: THE COVID-19 CHRONICLES

# COMIC RELIEF

Through comic strips, home-grown artists are disseminating information about Covid-19 and sending out heartwarming messages amid the pandemic

Hannah Bock

The Covid-19 outbreak has been a challenging and chaotic period for many, but artists in Singapore are providing much-needed clarity with the comics they illustrate. These range from infocomics on how to prevent the spread of the coronavirus to heartwarming vignettes about life as a healthcare worker.

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## The Covid-19 Chronicles

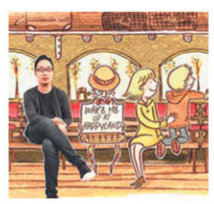
With colourful panels and catchy titles like "Don't Reuse Soggy Masks" and "No Hoarding Needed", the Covid-19 Chronicles has been sharing timely reminders and useful information with the public for the past five months. The project was conceptualised on Feb 11, when Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of the National University of Singapore (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School Of Medicine, attended a meeting with Health Minister Gan Kim Yong. When Prof Chong mentioned that Professor Dale Fisher (above), who lectures on infectious diseases at NUS, was also chairing the World Health Organisation's alert and response system, Mr Gan suggested appointing Prof Fisher as a spokesman to help ensure that information is communicated accurately and efficiently. Prof Chong approached Prof



Fisher immediately, while also doing research to find a medium that would "grab the public's attention easily". He noticed that although there were many news reports and print advisories, few people had come up with comic strips about Covid-19. As such, the communications team at Yong Loo Lin School Of Medicine began looking for an artist to partner them, and reached out to illustrator Andrew Tan, who typically illustrates local children's book series Sherlock Sam, as well as print ads, magazines and picture books. He is also the author of two graphic novels: *Monsters, Miracles & Mayonnaise*, published by Epigram Books, and *The Ollie Comics*:

## An ode to healthcare workers

To picture book author and artist Josef Lee (right), the city of Wuhan in central China is much more than the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak. Having travelled there in 2018 to promote two of his books, he has fond memories of the place and the people he met, some of whom he is still connected with on WeChat. "As they went into lockdown, I could see their status updates and the photos they shared, so I'd regularly check on them just to make sure they were safe and not sick," he says. On Jan 31, he posted a "logo" he drew to rally some support for them on his Instagram @joseflee.stories - a blue ribbon incorporating the Chinese characters of Wuhan, with the hashtag #PrayForWuhan written below. But shortly after, as Singapore began seeing its first few Covid-19 cases, Mr Lee was saddened by the "many obvious signs of racism" around him, like people making hateful comments to "ban people from China" online. "My fastest and most immediate response was to create comics to address some of these issues," he says. Back then, the "virus was still new to us" and many people were unsure of how to react, but his comics, sketched in fine pencil and blue hues, were a gentle reminder to take a step back and be kind.



In early April, he began a series on healthcare workers that is still regularly updated. The first of the 34 comics were based mostly on media reports or what healthcare workers were sharing on social media, but many people also began writing in with their personal experiences as the series gained traction. For instance, after posting a comic on Father's Day about a doctor on a video call with his children, a reader commented that it reminded her of her husband, who was working in an intensive care unit at the hospital. "I thought of him in your new story, Josef," she wrote. "His patients are very ill and he has been very sad the past few days, but today, maybe with more energy from our family day yesterday, he said to me: 'No patient will die tonight.'"

Diary of a first-time dad, which is self-published. Prof Chong, 56, says: "I thought a well-drawn cartoon would stand out, and to our surprise, it really captured the imagination of the public. We also thought some levity would be appreciated during these uncertain times." The comic strips, which have been released about thrice a week since Feb 14, are indeed popular for their bite-sized content and often humorous dialogue. In "Dining Out During Phase 2", for instance, four friends meet for a meal of prata. They remind one another of the necessary precautions to take - like safe distancing, hand-washing and limits to groups of five. But in the last panel, they are seen groaning, clutching their bellies and saying: "I think we forgot about one other precaution... Stop when full..." Another comic, "Spot The Mistake In Each Scene", encourages readers to look out for mistakes like

different teams interacting with one another at the office. It is a creative reminder to "stay vigilant in observing safe management measures" as employees return to the office. To date, the NUS team and Mr Tan have uploaded 70 comic strips on their website, some of which were drawn by another illustrator Anjee Neo, their back-up artist. Collectively, the comic strips have been viewed more than three million times on various social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. "We are very honoured that our simple health messages are helping in the fight against Covid-19 by giving accurate information, debunking myths, and providing some joy and laughter," says Prof Chong.

Read The Covid Chronicles at [nusmedicine.nus.edu.sg/medias/news-info/2233-the-covid-19-chronicles](https://nusmedicine.nus.edu.sg/medias/news-info/2233-the-covid-19-chronicles)



Artist Josef Lee's comic series on healthcare workers is based on media reports, social media sharing and the personal experience of readers writing to him. PHOTOS: JOSEF LEE

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"What keeps me going is definitely the comments, e-mails and messages that I get from healthcare workers and their families, telling me how the comics have encouraged them, brightened their days,

or shared their real experiences with others," Mr Lee says. Read I Am A Healthcare Hero at [joseflee.wordpress.com/2020/04/11/iamahhealthcarehero](https://joseflee.wordpress.com/2020/04/11/iamahhealthcarehero)

FROM C1

# Her comic is available in 40 languages

In December last year, user experience designer Kow Wei Man fell ill with a serious respiratory illness that left her coughing for months.

"I didn't want to catch such a terrible sickness again, so I began reading up on the precautions I could take, which turned out to be pretty similar to those for Covid-19," the 33-year-old says.

The first comic she drew was more of a "note-to-self" than a public service announcement, but it went viral when she posted it on her Facebook page on Jan 31. It has since reached more than three million people.

Besides reminding readers of ways to protect themselves – and others – from Covid-19, it also explains how the coronavirus spreads in simple terms.

Commenters began asking for a Chinese translation of the comic to show their parents, which inspired Ms Kow to upload a template of her

drawings with blank spaces for volunteer translators to add their own text.

Now, her coronavirus comic is available in about 40 languages.

She was touched when some parents in China and teachers in Indonesia told her that their kids did not use to wash their hands, but did after reading her comic.

People from countries like Turkey and the United States have also written to her after their parents or elderly grandparents sent them the PDFs of her comic over WhatsApp.

"It makes me glad to see that (the comic) has been clear and useful to many people globally and across generations," she says.

Besides the comic about how the coronavirus spreads, she has posted seven other Covid-19 related comics on her website comicsforgood.com.

This includes a revised and updated edition of the first comic,



After designer Kow Wei Man (below) fell very sick with a respiratory disease, she researched precautions she could take and drew her first comic (left) as a reminder to herself, but it went viral when she posted it on her Facebook page in January. PHOTOS: KOW WEI MAN

which took her about a month and a half to complete, as she not only conducted extensive research for it, but also put the comic through about 10 rounds of vetting from two medical doctors.

Ms Kow says the surge in global popularity of her comics earlier this year was likely due to a lack of accurate material that was also easily available and understandable.

She adds that she would like for governments and organisations to

not underestimate the importance of art, comics and artists in helping communicate vital public health information.

"I hope my work convinces organisations that comics can be a serious medium, and to hire more artists if they have an important message to spread," she says.

• Read Kow Wei Man's comics at [comicsforgood.com](http://comicsforgood.com)

