

PREFACE

I REMEMBER the morning in 2020 when I acceded to CEO's request to be Chief Editor of the SGH COVID-19 book. There was a lull in the COVID-19 battle. The local epidemiologic curve was sloping downwards. On the drive home, one encountered tree pruning and grass cutting – unmistakable signs that the migrant workforce, a sector hard hit by the virus, had come through the worst of COVID-19.

I was jolted out of these thoughts by CEO's mention of COVID-19 successes and fading memories. Success seemed a strange word to use when speaking of an epidemic. But, upon contemplation, not entirely baseless. If SARS had revealed our weaknesses and punished us for our naivete, COVID-19 appeared to have given us a chance to redeem ourselves. In those first nine or ten months of the pandemic, no cluster had formed in our wards, and no staff had caught the virus from a patient.

As for memories, well, the Straits Times would, in late 2021, remark that the mask would one day be found in some handbag in the attic, a relic of another time. An optimistic sentence (suggesting the pandemic would end!) but one recognising the frailty of memory. Indeed, as editors working our way through the book, we noticed how easily the memory failed – the mind lived history as a series of impressions, not facts.

Documenting good work done in extraordinary times seemed to be fair basis for a book. But who would we write the book for? Why would anyone read a book on COVID-19 and SGH?

The whole world confronted COVID-19 in one way or another. The mainstream press, social media and the academic literature were awash with tales of the destruction wrought by the virus. People who did not write professionally had turned to writing to share heart-wrenching experiences – intensivists numbed by the unquenchable cytokine storm in their patients, lay persons desperate for oxygen tanks, and the hapless many who had to let their spouse or parent go “in peace” without that last caress. What did we have to share that people might find worth reading? Singapore had a very low death rate, the hospital never ran out of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), no one had been denied an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) bed.

The editors came to a modest goal. We would write a book, first and foremost, for our staff. The staff themselves would provide the stories, recording how they navigated the choppy seas of the pandemic. The book would be a tribute to the staff.

In our dotage, we may be asked by our grandchildren what life was like as healthcare workers in the first pandemic of the century. With memories hazy from the passage of time and perhaps, incipient dementia, recourse to the book may provide opportunity for reminiscence, and protection from embarrassment. Yes, the book will be a historical record – a relic from another time, sure, but one that paints a vivid picture, mounted on facts. A student of history who, 50 years hence, dips into the book, will appreciate better the role that SGH played in Singapore’s campaign against COVID-19.

This collection of stories will appeal not just to SGH staff and history buffs, but also the casual reader. We have been candid and have exposed our inner workings, the cogs and wheels behind the clock face. If you ever wondered, from the confines of your homes, what your doctors and nurses did when your appointments were postponed, this book is for you.

The book is an amalgam of the editors' words and our staff's writing. We invited everyone to contribute their thoughts, experiences and feelings. But we knew that not all would write. A great many remained in the thick of action, even in late 2020, and more so in 2021. We also understood that writing was not everyone's cup of tea. Hence those Zoom interviews. We thank those who shared their stories with us.

In the course of this long pandemic, somehow we had a new COVID-19 ward, fully staffed, fully functional. Somehow the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, then the serology, and then the drugs, could be ordered on the computer. Somehow the data that the Ministry of Health (MOH) wanted were ready. Someone worked extra hard, sometimes overnight, to make these things happen. We are unable to name everyone who did the things that mattered. We apologise, unreservedly, to the many who remain unsung heroes.

The book has to be accurate yet readable. We have eschewed jargon as best we can, and we provide context through the fact box and the footnote, aware that we are insiders, and concerned about those fading memories. Even now, in early 2022, few can recall the elements of the "stabilisation phase"! The name of the virus

and the illness changed a few times, and we have chosen to use the name that was current at the time of a particular story. Titles and appointments are ephemeral (yes, despite the pandemic, promotions happened!), so we refer everyone by their official appointment in mid-2020. Only Emeritus Consultants are referred to as Professor in the footnotes, because verifying everyone's academic title proved to be overly onerous a task. As people will thumb through different sections of the book at different times, we spell out acronyms in full, and footnote individuals at the first mention in every chapter.

The book has had a long gestation and many thanks are in order. First, my gratitude to the rest of the editors, for putting this book together, and for tolerating me – my quest for consensus and fastidiousness with language must have been maddening, for everyone was fighting the pandemic right through it all. We are indebted to all who contributed, either in writing or via the interviews – their words form the bulk of this book. I would reserve a medal for Sai Luan, who acted as co-editor, Zoom host, fact checker, external liaison, and everything else in between. Our publishers likely did not anticipate such a protracted effort, nor such a difficult taskmaster, when they tendered for the job. We thank them for repeatedly accommodating us, and for giving us the independence we desired. We merely wrote; they brought the book to life.

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