ISSUE 10.2020

National Healthcare Group POLYCLINICS

Transforming PRIMARY CARE

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PROFESSIONALS GET PERSONAL
NHGP PHYSIOTHERAPIST AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST SHARE THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF THEIR PROFESSION

IN AND AROUND
KEEPING CLOSE WHILE STAYING APART



Tele-Physiotherapy



Tele-DOT



Tele-Consultations





Tele-Psychology



Tele-Dietetics

TELE-HEALTH SERVICES:

VIRTUAL PLATFORMS, REAL OUTCOMES

National Healthcare Group Polyclinics patients can now consult their care teams from the comfort of home

2020 APEX® AWARDS FOR PUBLICATION EXCELLENCE



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Stepping Up and Onwards

As we bid farewell to 2020 with the final issue of *Transforming Primary Care* for the year, we look back at the past months, which have been momentous to say the least. This year marks the 20th anniversary of National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP), and we commemorated this with a virtual celebration in November. 2020 is also a significant year in our two decade-long journey — since February, NHGP has been playing a critical role in the nation's battle against the spread of COVID-19. We readily took on the challenge, and swiftly introduced new ways to connect safely with patients and to reduce the risk of infection transmission. This is made possible through harnessing technology.



Real-world innovation has always been an integral part of NHGP's primary care transformation journey, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated our transition to a new norm of care. Leveraging technology, we expanded our offerings of tele-health services, which now include Video-Consultations (with doctors), Tele-DOT (Directly Observed Therapy), and Tele-Physiotherapy, which you can read about in our cover story, 'Innovating For Impact'. Using video-conferencing technology, these services bring medical care right into the homes of our patients. You will also learn about the new nation-wide Primary Tech-Enhanced Care Home Blood Pressure Management Programme that allows patients with hypertension to transmit their blood pressure readings instantaneously to the care team in our feature story, 'Moving to the Beat of Tele-health'. Beyond convenience, this new mode of care has also brought about health improvements for participants. These examples demonstrate some of the benefits this new norm of care can bring to patients and caregivers, and we hope everybody will embrace these new services.

While we look back, we also plan ahead. We hope you have enjoyed our newsletters this year, and look forward to engaging you through this publication in the upcoming year. And to start 2021 with our mind and body in tip top shape, a physiotherapist and a clinical psychologist each shares insights into their respective professions in *Up Close With*, highlighting to us the importance of mental and physical health – both integral parts to holistic wellness. So, let us continue to stay healthy as we head into the year-end celebrations! And Happy New Year to all our readers!

The Editorial Team

CONTENTS

3 **PRIMARY TECH-ENHANCED CARE**
A new programme to help patients with high blood pressure self-manage their conditions with ease

4 **INNOVATING FOR IMPACT**
A look at how NHGP's suite of tele-health services are becoming the new norm of care in the wake of a pandemic

6 **UP CLOSE WITH**
A senior physiotherapist and a clinical psychologist provide insights into their careers and share how they overcome challenges at work

8 **IN AND AROUND**
A round-up of webinars and virtual training efforts that NHGP has carried out in recent months

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MOVING TO THE BEAT OF TELE-HEALTH

A new national programme harnesses technology to help hypertension patients self-manage their condition.

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The care team from Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic who piloted the PTEC Hypertension service.

At the end of 2017, a group of clinicians and patients from Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic partnered the Ministry of Health Office for Healthcare Transformation (MOHT) to plan, experiment with, and fine-tune a technology-based blood pressure home monitoring kit for patients with hypertension. This included the co-development of a chatbot that was built in adherence to Singapore's clinical practice guidelines for hypertension. The chatbot algorithms and protocols were also developed through input from the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics' (NHGP) clinicians and feedback from patients to ensure the delivery of a safe and high-quality tele-monitoring service. In line with NHGP's goal of empowering patients to achieve better health outcomes, the Primary Tech-Enhanced Care (PTEC) Home Blood Pressure (BP) management programme pilot begun at Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic in August 2018. With encouraging pilot results, this programme was made available to patients with hypertension[1] at Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic in August 2020.

THE TEAM BEHIND THE CARE

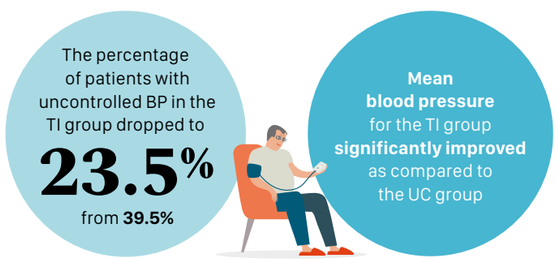
Patients on the PTEC Home BP management programme are supported by NHGP's care team (teamlet) comprising two doctors, a care manager and a care coordinator. Together, they maintain the continuity of care to patients, and identify patients suitable for this programme.

While the doctors formulate action plans whenever a patient displays abnormal BP readings that require intervention, the care managers play the essential role of monitoring the patients and providing timely advice to them where necessary. They keep a close watch on patients BP readings and follow-up with them when their BP readings are abnormal. Care managers also review patient's medication via tele-consultation and after discussion with their teamlet doctor, adjustments may be made to the medications if the patient's BP is sub-optimal. The care coordinators, who are in charge of helping patients enrol into the programme, further smoothen the user experience by helping to set up the HealthHarmony app on patients' smartphones, assigning BP machines and demonstrating to patients how the equipment should be used. The care coordinators also help to resolve patient enquiries, especially with regard to operating issues encountered at home.

PILOT RESULTS AT ANG MO KIO POLYCLINIC

The PTEC Hypertension service piloted at Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic has shown positive clinical outcomes, improved patient adherence to home monitoring and enhanced patient experience. A study was conducted on two groups of 120 high blood pressure patients from September 2018 to March 2019, with one group receiving additional Tele-BP monitoring intervention (TI group), and the other receiving usual care (UC group) [*see graphic*]. Patients also expressed greater satisfaction with the programme providing improved convenience, confidence in their care team and motivation to monitor their BP regularly. The study also showed that tele-monitoring empowers patients to monitor their blood pressure at home, and enhance their blood pressure control. PTEC Hypertension has also allowed NHGP's care team to monitor patients' blood pressure remotely and intervene when necessary.

Comparison of patients in TI and UC groups after 6 months



PTEC BP MONITORING HOME PROGRAMME

This tele-health programme allows patients with hypertension to monitor their blood pressure easily from home using a Bluetooth-enabled device captured in real-time that transmits the readings to their polyclinic care team via an app. A chatbot alert also sends tips on BP control, and messages patients who miss checking their weekly BP reading. If their BP levels are not well-controlled, a nurse will follow-up through tele-consultation and have their medication adjusted if required.

BENEFITS FOR PATIENTS:

- Reduces physical visits to the clinic
- Increases confidence and capability in self-managing hypertension
- Increases sense of security that medical team is monitoring his/her condition regularly
- Improves convenience in tracking own BP and monitoring progress

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Between 21 and 80 years old
- Diagnosed with hypertension[2]

[1 & 2] Patients with diabetes, proteinuria or chronic kidney disease are excluded from the programme.



INNOVATING FOR IMPACT

How can healthcare providers maintain a high-level of contact with patients in a low-touch era? The National Healthcare Group Polyclinics finds a solution through ramping up its suite of tele-health services.

When the government introduced Circuit Breaker measures earlier this year to prevent the spread of COVID-19, person-to-person interactions were severely limited. Yet, the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) continued to provide a new norm of care to its patients by leveraging technology to expand its suite of tele-health services. These new tele-health services — which include Video-Consultations (with doctors), Tele-DOT, Tele-Dietetics, Tele-Psychology and Tele-Physiotherapy — were designed to allow eligible NHGP patients to receive care in the comfort of their homes.Prescribed medication can also be delivered to the patient's doorstep following the session.

This expanded suite of services builds upon the lessons learnt from NHGP's existing tele-health services, such as Tele-Consultation Home Monitoring and Education, Tele-DERM and Tele-Wound Monitoring which have been available since 2013, 2016 and 2017 respectively.

Since February 2020, these new tele-health services have seen more than 50,000 tele-health sessions conducted, with the majority of patients indicating that they were satisfied with the service.

VIDEO-CONSULTATIONS (WITH DOCTORS)

Introduced in February 2020, NHGP's Video-Consultations (with doctors) service is designed for patients with well-controlled chronic conditions, such as diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol. Eligible patients are identified and contacted by the healthcare team for a video consultation appointment with a Family Physician to replace an in-person visit at the polyclinic. After assessment, medications for chronic conditions can be prescribed and patients can choose to have these delivered to their homes. If tests or screenings are needed as part of a patient's care plan, such as diabetic foot and eye screenings, or blood tests, patients will have to visit the polyclinic in person.



In April 2020, Hougang Polyclinic also started offering Video-Consultations (with doctors) for the elderly patients of Sunlove Home who have regular follow-ups with the care team. Rather than having to travel to the clinic, they can now connect with NHGP doctors through scheduled video consults. NHGP is also exploring similar collaborations with other nursing homes whose residents are current patients.

TELE-DIRECTLY OBSERVED THERAPY (DOT)

As part of the Singapore Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (STEP), NHGP has been providing Directly Observed Therapy (DOT) to patients with tuberculosis. Available at Yishun Polyclinic and Woodlands Polyclinic since June 2020, patients with tuberculosis who fulfil the criteria set by the Tuberculosis Control Unit (TBCU) for Tele-DOT are now able to substitute face-to-face Directly-Observed-Therapy at polyclinics with a video call from the safety and convenience of their homes.

During the Tele-DOT session, patients will consume the medication one-by-one in front of the nurse. After two weeks of Tele-DOT sessions, patients are required to return to the polyclinic for review. Those who follow the care plan can continue to be seen via Tele-DOT until they are due to return to the TBCU for a medical check-up.



TELE-PSYCHOLOGY

Introduced in February 2020, NHGP's Tele-Psychology service enables NHGP's clinical psychologists to provide essential mental health support and timely interventions over the phone to eligible patients with existing psychologist review appointments. This allows patients to better manage depression, anxiety, insomnia or other stress-related problems for early detection and risk management. A pre-screening is required to ascertain the patient's suitability for the service. Patients who need to discuss intense or complex psychological issues will continue to be seen via a face-to-face consult.



TELE-DIETETICS

From March 2020, NHGP patients with chronic conditions as well as paediatric patients with feeding and nutritional needs can now receive dietetic consults via video calls with NHGP dietitians. Besides offering convenience and time-savings for patients, Tele-Dietetics also allows them to be followed-up at closer review intervals to allow dietitians to incorporate effective dietary changes in their life. The remote consultation from the patients' home or office further allows dietitians to develop specific dietetic interventions that are practical in an environment familiar to the patient.

> "Tele-Dietetics has allowed us to observe a patient's home environment, enabling us to work more closely with patients to develop practical diet plans that are tailored and targeted. For instance, I would be able to provide valuable practical guidance specific to the patient's dietary habits if the video consultation coincides with the patient's meal time."
>
> **Ms Tan Sheau Kang,** Senior Dietitian, Toa Payoh Polyclinic



TELE-PHYSIOTHERAPY

Introduced in June 2020, Tele-Physiotherapy gives eligible NHGP patients with existing physiotherapy review appointments the option to conduct their physiotherapy review via video consultations. This service gives patients pain relief and improved daily physical functions through early effective treatment. Tele-Physiotherapy is also used for patients with chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity, where exercise prescription is provided to help them increase physical activity to improve disease control and lose weight safely. Patients' movements and prescribed exercises are properly guided during the video consultation.



OF MENTAL RESILIENCE AND PHYSICAL RECOVERY

As we marked World Physical Therapy Day on 8 September and World Mental Health Day on 10 October, Senior Physiotherapist Mr Gary Cheok, and Clinical Psychologist Ms Tan Sing Wuing from the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) gave us a glimpse into their professional lives.

I had always been interested in how psychology offers a spectrum of explanations about human thought, emotions and behaviours, and how these contribute to explaining the transitions across the human lifespan. In particular, it is about how stress and mental health problems affect people with medical conditions and how we as clinical psychologists in primary care can help these patients.



Connecting with people from different background — be it medical, psychological or social — and being part of their journey of healing and recovery keeps me excited and fulfilled each day. My work also presents meaningful learning opportunities through working with patients with mental, physical, or other chronic conditions and making sense of the problems they face. I also help them understand the underlying causes of their condition and help them find practical solutions.

Being in a primary care environment, I work with people of all ages, with a wide range of issues and complexities that contribute to their problems. My daily challenge is to maintain a clear mind and to remain humble to do my best for each patient I see. But the challenges are also opportunities for growth. By taking time and resource limitations in my stride, and accepting patients' differing readiness and commitment, I can take a positive approach to problem-solving and adopt a more flexible mindset.

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, I've learned to see situations as half-full rather than half-empty. I saw how NHGP managed the crisis through a blend of flexibility, adaptability and persistence, and I gained the new experience of integrating Tele-Psychology for delivering psychology service to patients. I also appreciate how our patients have adapted, especially during the early period of the Circuit Breaker*.

The biggest myth surrounding my profession? I am frequently asked: "Are you able to read my mind?" Psychologists seek to understand human behaviour and mental processes including thoughts and emotions behind this, through scientific evidence-based studies. Explaining how the human mind works — and accounting for our thinking and emotional processes — is a complex undertaking. It cannot be done by merely glancing at facial expressions or observing overt behaviours, and then attempting to make sense of these.

* A stay-home order and quarantine measures implemented by the Government of Singapore from 7 April to 1 June 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

I was on an observation session with the St John's Ambulance Brigade during my secondary school days when I first saw a physiotherapist teach a patient with a leg cast how to walk and climb the stairs with crutches. I found this interesting and meaningful, and went on to find out more about the profession. That was the moment that sparked my interest in the profession, and started my journey of becoming a physiotherapist.

A common misconception held by many is that physiotherapists primarily do massages. In fact, the role of a physiotherapist has many aspects, such as providing physiotherapeutic diagnosis for causes of muscle joint pain, patient education, health promotion and exercise prescription for optimum health and well-being.

One of the biggest challenges I have encountered was the high demand from people in the community who are seeking passive care for muscle and joint pain, but has limited understanding of their condition. With high patient volume and increasing patient needs at the polyclinic, the challenge has been to provide timely physiotherapy to all patients who need care. This is especially important as early treatment will prevent deterioration of these conditions, development of chronic pain and loss of function in the patient's daily life. I hope that with the recent introduction of Tele-Physiotherapy at NHGP, eligible patients will find it easier to manage their conditions promptly and actively.

Since June 2020, timely therapy interventions, through Tele-Physiotherapy, have been extended beyond the polyclinic walls for identified patients with musculoskeletal pain. Tele-Physiotherapy is an expedient tool which allows us to deliver targeted care remotely. We are able to assess functional movements done in the home setting, and better understand patients' lifestyle and needs in order to offer practical therapeutic interventions.



I get a sense of satisfaction from helping my patients. I feel gratified when they tell me that they feel better and are able to attain the physical functions they desire. Furthermore, I feel a sense of pride when my patients are empowered to continue with their exercises at home, and continue to lead an active and healthy life.

My advice for those who are thinking of pursuing my profession is to find opportunities to observe physiotherapy in different care settings.

SHARING STRATEGIES AND ONLINE SOLUTIONS

On 14 May 2020, Associate Professor (A/Prof) Chong Phui-Nah, Chief Executive Officer of NHGP and Primary Care, was invited to speak at the second of a four-part webinar series titled 'Experiences from the Front Lines: The Global Primary Healthcare Response'. The webinar series was jointly organised by The Harvard Medical School Department of Global Health and Social Medicine's Program in Global Primary Care and Social Change, the Center for Primary Care, and members of the World Health Organization's Primary Healthcare Young Leaders Network. During the webinar, A/Prof Chong gave an overview of Singapore's response to COVID-19, and outlined the strategies adopted by NHGP, including harnessing technology to expand the suite of tele-health services to patients.





CONTINUED CARE IN A COVID-19 WORLD

As an invited guest speaker to an online seminar titled 'Telemedicine — Continued Care in a COVID-19 World' organised by the Singapore Medical Association on 13 June 2020, Dr David Ng, Family Physician, Consultant and Head of Special Projects (Primary Care), NHGP, shared NHGP's experience in scaling up tele-consultations from the start of Circuit Breaker period. The seminar was graced by the Ministry of Health's Director of Medical Services, Associate Professor Kenneth Mak, and attracted over 1,400 attendees.

HEALTH TIPS FOR SENIORS

On 26 September 2020, NHGP organised its first live webinar: *Living Well in your Golden Years*. The 90-minute session saw Ms Tay Mary Ann, Senior Physiotherapist, Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic and Mr Won Tin Chiang, Principal Dietitian, Toa Payoh Polyclinic sharing valuable insights on optimal nutrition to improve immunity, as well as appropriate exercises for active ageing. The webinar was well-received, with many of the 43 participants requesting for more related information to be shared at future sessions.







REMOTE (WEIGHT) CONTROL

Safe distancing measures did not stop NHGP's Lighter Life programme from carrying on their activities. Face-to-face group sessions were converted to video conferences where participants met virtually and interacted actively with dietitians and physiotherapists who facilitated their weight-loss journey. At one virtual session conducted in March 2020, Ms Carol Lin, Clinical Psychologist, Toa Payoh Polyclinic, shared insights on the topic of *Stress Management in Weight Management*. Facilitators also tapped into existing peer support group chat networks to continue to inspire and engage patients.



Photo by LKCMedicine

UNWAVERING SUPPORT FOR MEDICAL UNDERGRADUATES

When Singapore moved into DORSCON Orange in February 2020, Year 5 medical students from the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKCMedicine) who were in the midst of their Family Medicine Student Assistantship Programme clinical placements, had to receive their clinical training through simulated training sessions. Termed 'SimConsults', the sessions were carried out in the Clinical Sciences Building at LKCMedicine Novena Campus. The sessions were carried out in real time with NHGP's Family Physicians based in various polyclinics and shared through a video conferencing platform, allowing tutors to observe and share their in-depth feedback with the students after each consultation.