

Citation for the award recipients

The award is given to front-line fighters against Covid-19 for their unselfish dedication to their jobs in tackling the pandemic, despite personal sacrifices along the way.

Healthcare workers were at the ready when Covid-19 hit Singapore's shores. They had undergone rigorous training and knew just what to do. They were geared up to tackle what many have called the biggest crisis of a generation – and they stepped up to the plate and delivered.

These dedicated front-liners inspired many with their unflinching dedication, working long hours in personal protective equipment, drenched in sweat. Others researched vaccines and made sure healthcare operations ran smoothly. Their efforts helped Singapore keep its Covid-19 death rate low, and manage the outbreak well in comparison with other countries.

Singaporeans are grateful for the efforts of these heroes, who are represented by nurse clinician Abdul Wahab; Covid-19 swabber Benson Ng; Certis Integrated Quarantine Order Services commanding officer Nigel Quek; Duke-NUS Medical School professor Ooi Eng Eong, co-developer of Singapore's sole Sars-CoV-2 vaccine currently in human trials; and Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.



National Centre for Infectious Diseases executive director Leo Yee Sin receiving the ST Singaporean of the Year 2020 award from President Halimah Yacob at the Istana yesterday, flanked by Mr Warren Fernandez (left), editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group and editor of The Straits Times, and UBS Asia-Pacific president Edmund Koh. The four others representing national front-liners along with Professor Leo are (back row, from left) Mr Abdul Wahab, an NCID nurse clinician; Mr Benson Ng, a Covid-19 swabber employed under the Health Promotion Board; Mr Nigel Quek, commanding officer of Certis' Integrated Quarantine Order Services; and Professor Ooi Eng Eong, co-developer of Singapore's sole Sars-CoV-2 vaccine now in human trials. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE

# Covid-19 front-line fighters recognised for dedication

ST award goes to the selfless workers who stepped forward to keep S'poreans safe

THE STRAITS TIMES SINGAPOREAN OF THE YEAR 2020

PRESENTED BY UBS

Shabana Begum

Covid-19 front-liners, who worked long hours and often went beyond the call of duty to keep Singaporeans safe amid the pandemic, have collectively been named The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2020.

This year, the recognition goes not to an individual but to all the selfless workers and volunteers in healthcare, security and other areas who stepped forward in the past year. Shaking off the fear of being exposed to possible infection, many in personal protective equipment, with sweat dripping from their hair, and faces marked with lines left by tight goggles and N95 masks.

Others researched vaccines, trialled therapies on the severely ill, and made sure healthcare operations ran smoothly. Collectively, their efforts have helped Singapore keep its Covid-19 death rate low and manage the outbreak well at a time when infections continue to recur globally.

The national front-liners are represented by nurse clinician Abdul Wahab from the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID); Mr Benson Ng, a Covid-19 swabber employed under the Health Promotion Board; Mr Nigel Quek, commanding officer of Certis' Integrated Quarantine Order Services; Professor Ooi Eng Eong, co-developer of Lunar-Cov19 – Singapore's sole Sars-CoV-2 vaccine now under clinical trials; and NCID's executive director Leo Yee Sin.

They received the award from President Halimah Yacob, the guest of honour and patron of the award, at a ceremony at the Istana yesterday. The ceremony was also streamed on The Straits Times' Facebook and YouTube channels. Madam Halimah said the Singaporean of the Year award has an enduring value as it reinforces the values that society holds dear.

"Amid the challenging Covid-19 environment, many have stepped up to help others in greater need, from migrant workers, to the underprivileged, to Covid-19 patients. The eight finalists of this year's award exemplify this same selfless spirit we are celebrating today," added the President. The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award, now in its sixth year, is given to a Singaporean individual or group that has made an impact on society. This could be through achievements that have put Singapore on the world stage, or for improving the lives of others in the community, or showing resilience in the face of adversity.

The other seven finalists include social activist Cai Yinzhou, 30, a forerunner in efforts to break down social barriers between Singaporeans and migrant workers, and retired cleaner Zulkifli An-nawi, 60. Mr Zulkifli and his four children give out groceries to residents of rental flats in Queenstown and help with home repairs under their initiative, Project Hills.

The top recipients were picked by a judging panel of 13 and through online voting by members of the public. They received \$50,000 in cash, sponsored by award presenter UBS, and a trophy, while the other finalists received \$5,000.

Singapore Airlines gave five pairs of business class tickets to the winning group and up to three pairs of economy class tickets to each finalist. Millennium Hotels and Resorts gave each member of the winning group a free five-day stay at any of its hotels worldwide, while the finalists received up to three sets of a three-day stay.

Mr Warren Fernandez, editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group and editor of The Straits Times, was one of the judges. He said 2020 was a year when the front-liners made all the difference to the lives and livelihoods of Singaporeans. "There were so many who played a part – doctors, nurses, epidemiologists and scientists, contact tracers and swabbers, volunteers and retired healthcare workers who came forward to help tackle the situation in the dormitories – all pitching in to help see Singapore through."

NCID has been the main battleground in the race to save lives, treat and break the chain of transmission since the pandemic began. While the Covid-19 flames are ebbing now, NCID is not done with getting to know the coronavirus, said Professor Leo, 61. For one thing, NCID continues to anchor the Covid-19 Research Workgroup, with the focus now on improving diagnostics and vaccine response, and studying virus evolution, including the more contagious variants.

In a nod to the award's finalists, UBS Asia-Pacific president Edmund Koh, also one of the award's judges, said: "It is extremely inspiring to hear the stories of our amazing finalists. Not only have they displayed courage and perseverance in their fields, but (they have) also inspired and encouraged those around them to follow the path they have spearheaded."

He also highlighted the work of Health Minister Gan Kim Yong and Education Minister Lawrence Wong, the co-chairs of the multi-ministry task force tackling the coronavirus outbreak. The pair have done the job well despite taking a lot of criticism along the way, and done it in a steadfast manner with the belief of making Singapore even better, said Mr Koh. "I think that warms the heart for all of us," he added. "There were very difficult decisions to make, you can't win it all," he said. "These two ministers have really done Singapore proud."

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The Straits Times' Singaporean of the Year nominees and guests at the award ceremony in the Istana yesterday. There were eight finalists for the award, which is now in its sixth year.

# Pandemic has spurred S'poreans to show compassion: President

Goh Yan Han

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed Singaporeans in many ways, whether it has been getting into the habit of wearing masks daily or showing more compassion and kindness to those around them, President Halimah Yacob said yesterday.

"The response of Singaporeans, particularly to the needy and less privileged, has been heartwarming. With this pandemic of disease, there is also the pandemic of kindness, generosity and compassion," she said at The Straits Times' Singaporean of the Year 2020 award ceremony held at the Istana.

More have donated money to those in need, while the number of volunteers has also increased, according to data from last year. "So, deep in the hearts of many Singaporeans resides this desire to surmount our own limitations and needs, and to be greater than ourselves," said Madam Halimah, noting that not all countries have stood together in the same way.

The Singaporean of the Year award this year is particularly meaningful, given how trying last year was, she added. "Our economy and lives were disrupted, and we have had to make tremendous adjustments to everything that we had hitherto held dear and thought were constants," said Madam Halimah.

She noted that the Singaporean of the Year award recognises the many role models in society who have shown outstanding acts of thought and planning, she added. "To some extent, we now must think a lot deeper about how our actions and behaviours will affect the well-being of others, and not just ourselves," she said.

"But we must continue to find occasions to celebrate goodness and virtue, like this award," said Madam Halimah, congratulating the eight finalists. How long the pandemic will last is uncertain, given the many variables like the emergence of different and more contagious variants of the virus, she added.

A lot also depends on whether people are able to accept some limitations on their freedom of movement and engagement in social activities, which have been met with resistance in many countries, said Madam Halimah. "The simple act of masking up, for example, may seem mechanical and necessitated by law, but it is a tremendous step forward in being thoughtful and considerate to protect others."

"It pushes us to think about what it means to be part of a community and how much of our shared living space has an impact on us, and what we must do to collectively protect it."

She noted that in Singapore, everyone will get the vaccine for free, and the Government has tapped the reserves to provide "tremendous relief" to mitigate the harsh impact of the pandemic.

"As a result of the Government's fast action, through no less than five budgets, we have helped many Singaporeans and businesses. We helped to save jobs and provide stability to our businesses and families," she said. She noted that the pandemic is far from over in Singapore, although the vaccine offers some relief and the possibility of attaining herd immunity if enough Singaporeans are vaccinated. "But unless a significant portion of the whole world is inoculated too, it is difficult to see how we can return to the pre-Covid-19 normalcy."

He also highlighted the work of Health Minister Gan Kim Yong and Education Minister Lawrence Wong, the co-chairs of the multi-ministry task force tackling the coronavirus outbreak. The pair have done the job well despite taking a lot of criticism along the way, and done it in a steadfast manner with the belief of making Singapore even better, said Mr Koh. "I think that warms the heart for all of us," he added. "There were very difficult decisions to make, you can't win it all," he said. "These two ministers have really done Singapore proud."

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# AWARD REINFORCES IMPORTANT VALUES

By highlighting their contributions, the award seeks to reinforce the values that we hold dear as a society and which stand us in good stead through good and bad times. Hence, this award will have an enduring value.

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# TEAM EFFORT IN FIGHT

It is a privilege to represent the many who have worked very hard to understand Sars-CoV-2 as well as our immune response to infection. These research works formed the foundation for our efforts to develop new therapeutics and vaccines to overcome this Covid-19 pandemic. Research requires teamwork, including collaborations across different labs with different expertise. I am thus only representing the many who have contributed to the fight against Covid-19 through science.

I would like to thank all of my colleagues at NCID and colleagues from other institutions for working together through this challenging period. Covid-19 has united us and we have emerged stronger. The battle is not over yet, but we have one another's strength and shoulder to rely on. Sars-CoV-2 is a tricky virus. It is not over yet even with the recent vaccine roll-out. I urge all to practise safe management measures to keep the entire community safe by keeping yourself safe.

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# HAPPY TO GIVE BACK

I feel honoured to be representing the Health Promotion Board's swab workforce. Yet, I am only a part of this collective effort by everyone involved in swab operations... I was quite happy (to be deployed to the dorms) because I could help give back to the foreign workers. I never had a chance to let them feel that Singaporeans care for them. I would also thank them after taking their nasal swabs.

Many of our Certis front-liners proactively volunteered for this operation as they wanted to do their part for the community. They have been working tirelessly for the past year braving the unknown just to keep each and every one in Singapore safe every day... As the pandemic continues to be challenging, we are still working hard and committed to ensuring the safety of the public.

# HOW THEY ROSE TO THE CHALLENGE

The most stressful period was the start of Covid-19, when we received the first critically ill patient who tested positive. We knew very little about the virus at that time, and were concerned whether it would be very infectious and how we would need to respond... What keeps me fulfilled and looking forward to work every day is seeing patients recover and get discharged from hospital.

Mr Abdul Wahab, 54, nurse clinician in the intensive care unit at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

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