

STANDOUT SINGAPOREANS

These nominees for The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year made their mark in such diverse fields as social services, healthcare and gaming



Mr Abdul Wahab, a nurse clinician in NCID's ICU, had refrained from visiting his elderly mother this year but did not expect she would die last month after developing heart failure. He saw her just three times this year. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI



Mr Nigel Quek, commanding officer at Certis' Integrated Quarantine Order Services, says it was gratifying to see his officers step up during the pandemic's peak when they had to serve many quarantine orders in dorms. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Front-liners in the battle against Covid-19 in S'pore

Shabana Begum

When the Covid-19 outbreak began in January, Mr Abdul Wahab, 54, a nurse clinician in the intensive care unit (ICU) at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) refrained from visiting his elderly mother so as not to expose her to the virus.

He looked forward to hugging her once it ended. When his mother developed heart failure in October, he was stuck between wanting to be by her side, and keeping her safe from anything that might be on him.

But he did not expect that she would die last month. Mr Wahab had seen his mother just three times this year – twice in hospital and once at home.

For their unselfish dedication to their jobs despite the personal sacrifices, Mr Wahab and four others have been nominated to represent the army of people on the front lines of the Covid-19 battle as The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year.

The virus kept Mr Wahab on his toes as he encountered new clinical challenges despite having worked in ICUs since 1996. He had to learn to use the extra-corporeal membrane oxygenation machine, which took over the functions of the hearts and lungs of the sickest patients.

For Mr Benson Ng, 32, who used to work in food retail, the menace of Covid-19 hit too close to home when his 58-year-old father fell ill with the virus in March.

His father received oxygen therapy as he was closely monitored in the ICU for a few days of his two-week hospitalisation. Even after

discharge, he suffered sleepless nights and muscle pain for about a month.

Seeing how ill his father became compelled Mr Ng to sign up in May to be a swabber for Covid-19 tests.

"The experience that my family went through made me very determined to do something to fight the virus," said Mr Ng. From May to August, he was deployed in dormitories, taking nasal swabs from migrant workers. Since September, he has been part of a roving team that carries out routine testing in dorms and for hawker stallholders, among others.

The other faces in the battle against the pandemic are Mr Nigel Quek, commanding officer at Certis' Integrated Quarantine Order Services, and Professor Leo Eng Eong, co-developer of Singapore's sole Sars-CoV-2 vaccine now undergoing human trials; and Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of NCID.

Mr Quek, 34, who supervises hundreds of quarantine order agents in Certis, said it was gratifying to see his officers step up, especially during the peak of the pandemic here, when they had to serve high numbers of quarantine orders in the dorms. When Mr Quek was swamped with managing deployments, some of his officers stepped up to lead dorm operations for him.

The officers – whom Mr Quek code-named "Guardians" – shed their usual stern demeanour and did their best to reassure migrant workers, many of whom could not understand English and were afraid.

"Most of the workers had never used a thermometer before. We built rapport with a worker who

could converse in English to help us translate our instructions," said Mr Quek.

The work of a quarantine order agent includes issuing quarantine orders, checking if homes are suitable for quarantine, and escorting persons under quarantine to government quarantine facilities.

Serving quarantine orders was the first deployment for some new auxiliary police officers, said Mr Quek.

"The award nomination is a testament to all Certis front-liners' efforts to brave the unknown, and show professionalism and care in our operations and to the people under quarantine," he added.

Duke-NUS Medical School's Prof Ooi, who specialises in emerging infectious diseases, raced against time to develop a vaccine for the new coronavirus.

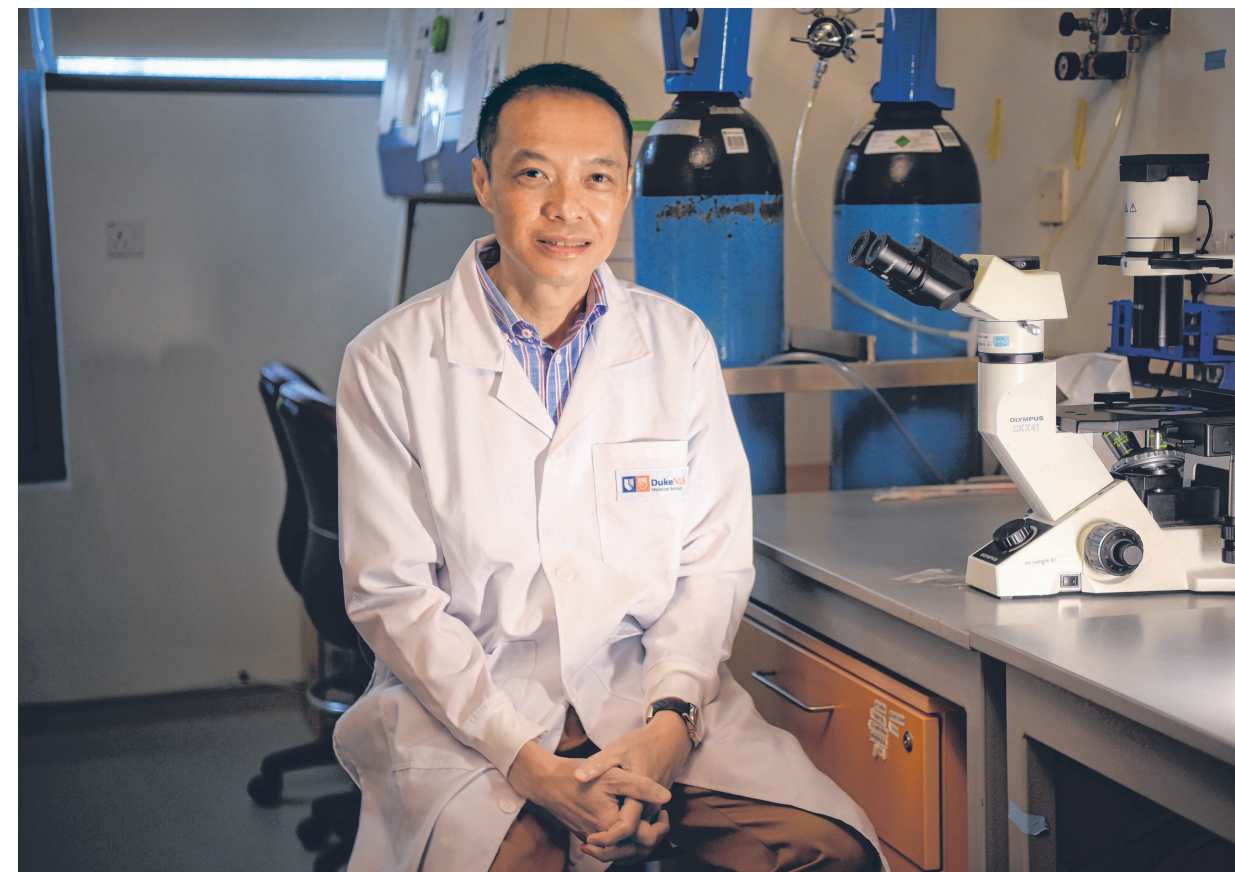
Where vaccine development typically takes five to 10 years, he and his team of 12 postdoctoral fellows and research assistants have had a hectic nine months working with American pharmaceutical company Arcturus Therapeutics to study the virus and conduct various vaccine-related studies simultaneously.

They are now analysing the blood samples of participants in phase one and two clinical trials, and the final phase of clinical trials for the Lunar-Covid vaccine is likely to start before the end of the year.

"I understand the pressure to succeed. Whatever we are doing is not just for the sake of science, but to help Singapore get out of this pandemic. We really had to put our best foot forward," said Prof Ooi. He is also the co-founder of a biotech company that has devel-



Mr Benson Ng felt compelled to sign up in May to be a swabber for Covid-19 tests, after seeing how ill his father became when he was infected with the coronavirus. His father was hospitalised for two weeks. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG



Duke-NUS Medical School's Professor Ooi Eng Eong, who specialises in emerging infectious diseases, is co-developer of Singapore's sole Sars-CoV-2 vaccine, which is currently undergoing human trials. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, which became the nerve centre of Singapore's battle against its biggest pandemic less than six months after it officially opened. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

oped a Covid-19 antibody drug, now in phase three trials, that could help patients recover faster.

NCID, which became the nerve centre of Singapore's battle against its biggest pandemic, less than six months after it officially opened in September last year, is helmed by Prof Leo.

"We designed NCID with the notion that it will handle an outbreak. It was just a matter of when. But I will say that we didn't really anticipate such a quick and successive encounter of emerging infections," she said.

Early last year saw a spike in measles cases and Singapore's first case of monkeypox infection. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic.

The institution was designed to be able to scale up its capacity from 330 beds to more than 500

when necessary. During the pandemic, manpower was ramped up from about 600 to more than 2,000, with reinforcements coming from Tan Tock Seng Hospital and other institutions.

Admitting the majority of hospitalised Covid-19 cases to NCID enabled the institution to "know the enemy," Prof Leo said. They could "swiftly characterise the disease pattern, support in-depth research, and set up an extremely valuable research cohort" for the country.

For example, the centre's Covid-19 research workshop discovered early that patients tend to shed a high viral load at the onset of infection, even when they are asymptomatic.

"This finding meant our preven-

tive measures had to be broader – everyone was told to wear masks and practise safe distancing."

Things are looking up as all Singaporeans and long-term residents will be able to get vaccinated by the end of next year.

But Prof Leo says the NCID's job is not yet done. "There are still a lot of unknowns about the disease, such as post-Covid-19 syndrome and reports of re-infections."

Post-Covid-19 or "long Covid" refers to long-lasting health effects of the virus that can last months or possibly even years.

Prof Leo added: "We don't know whether the virus will evolve and how the evolutions will affect us... We have to continue researching and studying this."

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A social enterprise founder who helps vulnerable women and youth at risk, a duo whose entrepreneurship in developing gaming chairs has put Singapore on the map, as well as front-liners devoted to combating the Covid-19 pandemic are the latest batch of nominees for The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award, presented by investment

bank UBS Singapore. Five other nominees have been announced so far – retired factory worker Lim Ee Chin, 81, who helped put out a fire in her neighbour's flat; social entrepreneur Cai Yinzhou, 30, who highlighted the concerns of migrant workers and helped them; retired cleaner Zulkifli Atnawi, 60, and the Project Hills initiative founded by his four chil-

dren which helps rental flat residents; former offender Anil David, 52, who set up a call centre to give others like him a second chance; and twin brothers Marcus and Joe Wee, 36, who set up a boutique PC builder company that has expanded overseas. Other partners of the award include Singapore Airlines and Millennium & Copthorne Hotels.

THE STRAITS TIMES SINGAPOREAN OF THE YEAR 2020 PRESENTED BY UBS

Making the world a better place through her Bettr Barista

Goh Yan Han

When Ms Pamela Chng decided to take a year off work due to burnout, it made her wake up and smell the coffee. Realising it was time to quit her job running a Web consultancy, she had the idea of starting her own business – and using it as a force for good.

Ten years later, she has done just that. Bettr Barista, her coffee firm which champions socially responsible practices, has earned her a nomination for The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2020 award. "The social business model spoke to me," said Ms Chng, 44. "I felt that a business' role in society is not just to maximise profit, but think about how it can create a condition where people can work happily and healthily and impact others in a positive way."

Combining this philosophy with her passion for coffee, she founded Bettr Barista in 2011. Ms Chng also wanted to tackle the systemic issues in the coffee value chain, down to the farmers who grow the beans, and ensure industry practices were more equal and inclusive.

Bettr Barista now has eight outlets across the island, a roasting facility and a coffee academy in Tai Seng.

It also runs a four-month programme for vulnerable women at-risk youth, which teaches them vocational skills and in-depth life skills. The programme has had 27 intakes since it started in January 2012, and has helped about 150 people.

While she is humbled to be nominated for Singaporean of the Year, Ms Chng said her work is a team effort including staff, corporate part-



Ms Pamela Chng quit her job running a Web consultancy and founded Bettr Barista in 2011. The firm, which champions socially responsible practices, runs a programme for vulnerable women and at-risk youth. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

ners, social organisations and even the Government. She is grateful for their support and collaboration over the years.

"It's very important to recognise that change needs a collective group of changemakers. You can't do it alone," said Ms Chng.

The success of the current four-month programme has given Ms Chng and Bettr Barista courage to keep it growing and expanding.

Next month, a two-month accelerated scheme – a Bettr Work Training Programme – will be rolled out, aimed at 40 to 50 individuals with fewer support needs

than those who attend the four-month programme. They will be given general food and beverage sector training and skills for emotional health.

Next year, the company will also revisit its plans to expand into Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines, which were put on hold due to the pandemic, and begin a subscription-based delivery model for its coffee.

Ms Chng advises others looking to set up social enterprises to understand their motivation for doing it. "Running a social business is

not for everyone," she added. "A normal business is hard, a social business is twice as hard because you have to also worry about the social and environmental bottom line, and cover the social costs. You have to be very clear as well, as to what problem you are trying to solve."

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SCAN TO WATCH Pamela Chng, Singaporean of the Year 2020 finalist. <https://str.sg/pamelachng>

Secret to their gaming chair success? Grit and passion

They met as aspiring professional gamers years ago, hoping for a chance to meet their heroes.

And now, Mr Ian Ang and Mr Alaric Choo have done it – by collaborating with and producing gaming chairs used by top-tier teams.

In 2015, the pair founded Secretlab, whose products are now sold in more than 60 countries.

Mr Ang, 28, had been decorating his room and realised that his gaming set-up – including keyboard, mouse and PC – was all there.

The missing piece? A gaming chair that would be comfortable, functional, look good and have a local warranty.

Since he could not find one on the market, Mr Ang decided to make it himself, and roped in Mr Choo, 32.

From a small office in 2015, the now multimillion-dollar firm has expanded to several units in a light industrial building in Bendermeir with close to 200 staff.

For their innovation and entrepreneurship – and for putting Singapore on the map as one of the most highly rated gaming chair manufacturers in the world – the Secretlab founders are nominees for this year's The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award.

When the company first started, it was unique in its field. The gaming chair industry was not as established as it is now. Secretlab is also direct-to-consumer and operates almost entirely online.

"There were no textbook answers or anybody to refer to out there," said Mr Ang, who is the firm's chief executive. "We've always had to take a very creative approach to everything that we do."



Mr Alaric Choo (left) and Mr Ian Ang are the founders of Secretlab, a multimillion-dollar firm that has become one of the most highly rated gaming chair manufacturers in the world. PHOTO: SAMUEL RUBY

Despite their success, the pair rarely stop to think about what they have accomplished or give themselves pat on the back.

"There's a saying at Secretlab that we always treat each day as if it's day one. We grow or we die, everyone should always innovate where they can, improve things and never be stuck in the process," said Mr Ang.

Mr Choo, who is chief strategy officer, added: "One of our biggest achievements is that we get to do something we're truly passionate about and do what we en-

joy, and work with people we're passionate about."

Public records show that Mr Ang owns a 70 per cent stake in Secretlab. Mr Choo has 25 per cent.

Both founders were tight-lipped when asked about their plans for the future, but Mr Ang said the company is always looking to grow, especially since the market in Singapore has become more saturated as Secretlab chairs become more mainstream.

When asked for their advice to budding entrepreneurs, Mr Ang said: "Entrepreneurship is a lot

about grit. It's not about not abandoning the business, but when it's stressful you embrace it and not take the easy way out."

Mr Choo added: "It's not for everyone. We actually learnt a lot about business from playing games... It helped us be a lot more analytical and honest with ourselves."

It also aimed to identify how these factors contributed to the successful development of English and mother tongue language and literacy skills.

The team will also study the effect of initiatives such as the Learning Support Programme, which involves additional support for children lagging behind their peers.

SCAN TO WATCH Ian Ang and Alaric Choo, Singaporean of the Year 2020 finalists. <https://str.sg/secretlab>

Skip study

Room to improve teacher-child interaction quality

Sandra Davie Senior Education Correspondent

When it came to quality of teacher-child interactions, the Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project (Skip) found that pre-school teachers provided good emotional support to their young charges and held well-organised classes.

However, the study found that the quality of teacher-child interactions that stimulate children's thinking and language skills can be improved. The team suggested that this can be done through continuing professional development of pre-school teachers.

Of the 163 teachers who gave information on their qualifications, 22 per cent were degree holders in early childhood education, while the remaining were mostly diploma holders in the field.

"In early childhood education, it is important to provide the right environment for learning," said the National Institute of Education's Dr Ng Ee Lynn, the principal investigator of the study. She said the study found that pre-school educators here provided support for children to have autonomy in their learning and a warm learning environment, which was sensitive to children's needs.

Teachers also provided consistent daily routines, and used different learning resources and materials.

Dr Ng said the finding on the quality of instructional support should be investigated further, as many studies in the United States, Europe and China also revealed gaps in the quality of teacher-child interactions. "In similar studies around the world, teachers scored better in providing the right environment than quality of their instructional support."

Instructional support focuses on teachers' use of effective strategies to improve children's higher-order thinking, and language skills. The quality of interaction was assessed by observing how the teacher worked with children in a typical school day, once at K1 and again at K2.

The Skip team used the findings to develop tools and resources with the aim of raising the quality of teaching and learning in the pre-school sector in Singapore.

For example, based on the study's findings on instructional support, the Skip professional development project team has developed training videos and resources to improve teacher-child interactions in the pre-school classrooms. Dr Ng said in future studies, the team would like to include a wider range of kindergartens to see if quality pre-school education, for example those which employ only degree holders as teachers or have smaller class sizes, can make a difference.

In the study which just concluded, Skip focussed on kindergartens with a similar fee range for comparability. They included childcare centres, anchor operator and non-anchor operator kindergartens and Ministry of Education kindergartens.

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KEY FACTOR

In early childhood education, it is important to provide the right environment for learning.



DR NG EELYNN, the principal investigator of the study, who is from the National Institute of Education.

Skip team to continue to track kids' progress

The Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project (Skip) is Singapore's first large-scale longitudinal study of pre-school children.

It followed a cohort of 1,537 children from 80 pre-schools (childcare centres, anchor operator and non-anchor operator kindergartens and Ministry of Education kindergartens) as they progressed from Kindergarten 1 in 2015 to Primary 1 in 2017.

As part of the study, the research team – comprising Dr Ng Ee Lynn, Dr Beth O'Brien, Dr Nirmala Karupiah, Associate Professor Kenneth Poon and Dr Fan-nie Khng – conducted primary data collection and completed the analysis in July this year.

The aim of Skip was to understand how factors related to the school, home, and child interact to influence children's development and future learning.

It also aimed to identify how these factors contributed to the successful development of English and mother tongue language and literacy skills.

The Skip team used a variety of data collection methods, which included one-on-one child assessments, and parent and teacher surveys.

The team also used tools to assess the quality of teacher-child interactions and the quality of learning environment and materials.

The team hopes to continue tracking the Skip children in later years, at Primary 5 and how they perform at the Primary School Leaving Examination. Among the questions the researchers hope to address in the future are:

- The performance of Skip children "later in life" in terms of their socio-emotional, physical, and academic well-being.
- Factors in early childhood that can predict how well a child does in later years – including the home and pre-school environment, and literacy, numeracy and executive functioning skills of children at K1.
- Factors that may moderate the children's developmental trajectories, including the quality of school environment and peer influences.

The team will also study the effect of initiatives such as the Learning Support Programme, which involves additional support for children lagging behind their peers.