

“WE WRITE THE STORY TO RECORD
SUFFERING AND SACRIFICE, BUT ALSO THE
STRENGTHS AND REMARKABLE COMMITMENT
ON THE PART OF SO MANY TO SUCCESSFULLY
OVERCOME THE CRISIS.

WE WRITE IT TO REMEMBER BUT ALSO TO LEARN.
IF WE DO, THEN IN THE NEXT CHAPTER,
OUR HOSPITALS AND HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS
WILL BE BETTER, OUR LAWS MORE COMPLETE,
OUR VACCINES AND MEDICAL SUPPLIES MORE SECURE.

AND SO, WE WRITE OUR NEXT CHAPTER,
NOT KNOWING WHETHER THE WORLD WILL DAWN
BRIGHT OR DARK, HOSTILE OR FRIENDLY, BUT
CONFIDENT IN OURSELVES THAT SINGAPORE HAS
BECOME STRONGER THROUGH THIS CRISIS, AND
CAN STAND TALLER TO MEET THE NEXT ONE.”

— MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR HEALTH
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE ON SINGAPORE’S RESPONSE TO COVID-19
MARCH 21, 2023

EPILOGUE

It is hard to quantify the impact of the pandemic. Officially, Singapore recorded 1,711 deaths as of December 2022 due to COVID-19 infections. But the Ministry of Health estimates that another 2,000 deaths were due to undiagnosed infections, or complications arising from COVID-19 infections.

Beyond the death toll, there were other losses: children who missed out on in-person interactions with their peers and teachers in schools; businesses that shuttered; employees who were furloughed. Across the board, mental health took a major dip.

But amid the losses, there were gains too. There is greater resilience and resolve to do better the next round – because there will be a next round. The preparation work has already begun.

It started with a national programme in November 2022 to support and strengthen Singapore’s key research capabilities to detect and contain future infectious disease outbreaks. Called the Programme for Research in Epidemic Preparedness and Response, or PREPARE, it is led by Professors Wang Linfa from the Duke-NUS Medical School and David Lye from the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

Through PREPARE, Singapore will be

able to tap on pandemic researchers around the world to expand on the knowledge on emerging pathogens.

Other initiatives are also starting. More facilities to ease the load on the public hospitals will be built, with these Transitional Care Facilities receiving medically stable patients who are waiting for care arrangements such as nursing home care.

The Crisis Strategy and Operations Group which was established during the pandemic and undertook much of the pandemic-related operations such as contact tracing, quarantine, testing, vaccinations and home recovery, is now a permanent feature in MOH. A new Communicable Diseases Agency to oversee disease preparedness, prevention, control, surveillance, risk assessment and outbreak response has also been established.

But the most important shift is the introduction of Healthier SG, a substantial long-term reform of Singapore’s healthcare landscape that focuses on preventive care. This was helped by the close partnerships forged between private and public healthcare providers during the pandemic, and the increasing awareness of the importance of preventive healthcare.

The Healthier SG strategy was “born out of crisis and will profoundly change the landscape for healthcare in Singapore,” Minister for Health Mr Ong Ye Kung said in a parliamentary debate on Singapore’s response to COVID-19 on March 21, 2023.

This strategy seeks to improve the health of the population by urging Singaporeans to take charge of their health. Residents enrolled into the programme will have a regular doctor who will work with them on a personalised health plan to help them stay on track in meeting their health goals. They can also access a wide range of community programmes to stay active, socially connected and physically fit and healthy.

As people become more diligent about staying healthy, and ailments are identified and managed early, the overall strength and resilience of the country’s healthcare system will improve.

It has been said that what does not kill you will only make you stronger. Singapore has survived the pandemic to live and fight another day, with battle scars reminding us what not to do in future. There is hope that the city-state has not only emerged healthier and stronger after the pandemic, but also more prepared to meet new crises and challenges ahead.