Intro:
Hi, there! Welcome to MMI Episode 5 of MMI Podcast: Mental Health during Crises and Pandemics. Hope that you would enjoy this episode and watch this space as we provide you with more episodes to come. Also, do follow us on our Facebook- Malaysian Medics International and our website- www.malaysianmedics.org to know more about our interesting projects

Xin En:
Welcome to the fifth episode of our MMI podcast series, Mental Health during Crises and Pandemics. My name is Xin En.

Sheryl:
And my name is Sheryl.

Xin En:
And today’s episode is “Braving Pandemics, how is it like?”

Sheryl:
So today we have invited Dr Sean, a medical officer from Hospital Sultan Ismail. He will be sharing his working experience as a frontliner during the Movement Control Order (MCO) and how he copes physically and mentally during this challenging period. Welcome, Dr Sean!

Dr. Sean:
Hello!!

Xin En:
Hi, hi doctor!

Dr. Sean:
Hi!

Sheryl:
Hi, Dr Sean!

Dr. Sean:
Hi, my name is Sean Thum, I am currently working as a medical officer at Hospital Sultan Ismail in Johor Bahru.

Xin En:
So, if not mistaken, today is Day 41 of MCO, currently Malaysia has shown a downward trend of COVID-19 cases and all of these owe to the cooperation of Malaysians towards the MCO and not to forget the hard work of the frontliners.
Sheryl:
Yea, like Dr Sean.

Xin En
which I believe Malaysians are extremely thankful to them. So, Sheryl, how have these few weeks been for you?

Sheryl:
Erm, for this few weeks, to be honest, I wouldn’t say it’s boring. Quite occupied as I am still having online classes and everything, quite good and doing fine! What about you, Xin En?

Xin En
So, for me, I have been relaxing a lot. In fact to the extent of procrastination. So, actually I have read self-help books that I always wanted to read, played pc games that I have purchased, and left in my Steam library, cooking dishes, grooming my pets and a few more. But the main point is I procrastinated totally in my academics.

Sheryl:
(Laughter)

Xin En
So, how about Dr Sean? How have these past few months been for you?

Dr. Sean:
Hello! Well I am fine, thank you. Actually it has been a whirlwind 2 months. There are so many changes to our lives. Erm, the movement control order for one, but has brought so many changes. The cinemas are closed and movie releases delayed. I was actually waiting for Mulan to come out, you know, I was really looking forward to it. But unfortunately it has been delayed. But one particularly positive change is the reduction of cars in the road, so now I can get to my hospital really quickly.
Sheryl:
No jam right.

Xin En:
(Laughter)

Dr. Sean:
But in regards to my job though, there were many many changes. Erm, I was initially deployed to Hospital Permai for instance where I stayed over for two weeks to perform Covid duty. And after that, on my return to Hospital Sultan Ismail, I was transferred to the SARI ward, where I am actually a part of the team managing patients with lung infections. There were a lot of things I have to read up and to refresh my memories because as a Psychiatry trainee you don’t manage patients with lung infections very commonly. But it was a fun experience altogether.

Sheryl:
I see. So in view of this sudden occurrence of outbreak, other than the experience you have shared with us just now, we heard that you have gone from department to department, what is the other significant adjustment made on the hospital staff and infrastructure to combat against this COVID-19 outbreak.

Dr. Sean:
Erm, actually in the hospital settings, there were a lot of changes. We are all, patients and doctors alike, we are all required to wear masks now. We also have social distancing measures in place, where everybody is required to sit at least one metre apart. I trust that you have seen some of the images in social media, which showed chairs being columned off, ya that, so we have temperature check at every entrance, we also have increase in hand sanitizing locations. So, we all can see that there is a huge change in the environment. And i think one thing all of us will tell you is that the emergency department is less crowded now. The people who require emergency treatment are being cared for, yes, they are being cared for quite immediately when they reach the hospital. And that’s a positive change.

Xin En:
Oh, I see. So Dr, usually in the emergency department, when someone actually seeks treatment, usually in government hospital we have to wait for 1 to 2 hours just to get treatment and get everything checked. So for now, how long do we actually have to wait before we get attended?

**Dr. Sean:**

Well okay, I don’t have the exact numbers, but again, we need to speak this by the zones. So if someone requires immediate medical treatment, like say, the red zone, they always get treatment immediately, meaning there is no wait, they reach and they get attended to immediately. People in the yellow zone, where people who can afford to wait. So meaning, they usually wait for a little while before being seen. Some used to wait for quite some time before being seen. But now, when they reach, because of less crowd, they are able to get attended almost immediately as well. Er, the green zone usually has a longer waiting time, currently they have shorter waiting time as well.

**Xin En:**

Oh okay. So means that it’s obviously shorter than the usual time, right? But, I mean like, we don’t know the actual duration.

**Dr. Sean:**

Oh, okay, ya. We don’t have the exact duration, but it is shorter.

**Xin En:**

Alright! Dr. Sean, I believe this is your first time facing such pandemics, so actually how’s your experience in being a part of the team?

**Dr. Sean:**
While, it was fun, to be honest. I was very fortunate to be grouped with two different teams of fun people. People whom I am able to click well with, and that let to many enjoyable experiences. The atmosphere was actually like a school camp, we slept in sleeping bags, we ate maggi deep into the night, we borrowed someone else's toothpaste. That was actually quite fun. Erm, but we have to work to earn these fun times ya. And that was a meat in our sandwich and that was the most important thing la. So, I was in two different places where we had two different systems. In Hospital Permai, I was working from 8am to 5pm shift and a 5 am to 8 pm shift. Then in Hospital Sultan Ismail, I was working a 8am to 8pm and a 8pm to 8 am shift. So, the most interesting time is when we have to put on our PPE to work. Not all of us will put on PPE everytime, we choose among ourselves. Usually half of us will do clinical work, and another half will do administrative work, such as paperwork.

Xin En

Oh okay okay. Dr, so you said you usually sleep in the sleeping bag, is it because like, how to say, you don’t have the time to go back home, and then you just make a resting place in the hospital?

Dr. Sean:

Erm, I mean if you are working night shift right, you are expected to be staying in the hospital mah. Like, I have a sleeping bag, I usually bring along my sleeping bag. More comfortable mah, sleeping in a sleeping bag.

Xin En

Oh, okay okay. So doctor, actually if you do night shift, I mean you said that you are doing 2 shifts. Usually how long or how many hours are allocated for you to rest?

Dr. Sean:

Okay, so when we come to work, it is something like pandai-pandai lah. So meaning, you have to plan your time properly. When you see an opportunity, you grab it lah. But of course, when you want to rest you make sure your things are settled before you actually go to rest. Ya. So we try to complete our task early, let's say by 11 or 10pm. And once we finished everything, we bathed, then we took a bite, then we went to sleep. So there is no rigid time in a day that we go to sleep, but it is just that when we sorted everything out and feel like, okay it’s time, then we go and sleep.

Xin En
Okay okay. So, does this apply to your meal time as well?

Dr. Sean:
Ya of course. I mean, you need to find time off to go and makan right, but you obviously have to complete your task first. We have to be quite smart on this actually. Janganlah you work until you forget your lunch like that. Usually around 12 or 1, when we feel like okay, hmm it’s time for lunch, then we just say let’s have a break, 30 minutes maybe? Then we go makan, then we come back to work again.

Sheryl:
So, it’s like basically if you want to go for a break or you would like to have a break, just make sure to complete your tasks first. And also have to be aware or make sure to get enough nutrition to cope with all the cases and everything, right?

Dr. Sean:
Yes, because while we are providing service for the people, for the nation, it is important to know that the first person you have to take care of is yourself first. So, while things are busy while you have a lot of things to do, you must make sure to have proper nutrition and proper hydration.

Sheryl:
Yup!

Dr. Sean:
And proper rest la, of course.

Sheryl:
Of course, enough rest. Oh yeah, we actually came across a picture of you drenched in sweat after taking off the PPE with your facebook post that went viral. Can you share this experience like how was taking off and putting up PPE like, like how was this experience feel like?

Dr. Sean:
That would be right after my work la. So, it wasn’t easy putting on. There are a lot of steps and there are so many different pieces of equipment that you have to put on step by step. You have to do it in the right order. But we persevered because we understand that the PPE is there to protect us from contracting the virus. Now, the trouble is the material is waterproof. So when you put everything on, your heat and sweat are trapped within the cocoon and by the end of it, we are actually swimming in our own sweat. Ya, and aligning with other things that we undergo is the N95 mask. So the N95 mask that we are wearing has to be properly fitted to our nose and mouth. It has to cover our face. Which means that there won’t be any gas exchange with the environment, so that the virus won’t come in right. So we are basically breathing our own exhale and because we know that the exhale has more carbon dioxide content and it has warm and moist air, even our breathing requires more effort. So it wasn’t really an easy experience being in the full gear. We do our best to complete our task quickly, as quickly as possible. But, we want to say quickly right, we need to bear in mind that when we do our things right, we cannot like cincai do, we cannot simply do, we have to be responsible to the patient and also be responsible to the resources that we are using. So we have to get everything done in the right way. So, we usually spend about two to three hours in the suit. Only after we complete everything, we come out. And before we come out, we have to remove our gear step by step also. It is a very tacting procedure. But, when you are removing the face mask, it is like Woah! You are breathing new air and it is so refreshing.

Sheryl:
So, it’s like, finally able to breathe in air, because a lot of carbon dioxide was trapped inside. I am sure that it must be very tiring in wearing and taking off the PPE.

Xin En
Dr. Sean, you said that usually the frontliners will be in full PPE for an average of 2 to 3 hours, right?

Dr. Sean:
I mean that is my own experience la. So for us in our team, it is usually two to three hours on average.

Xin En
Ya. Oh, even wearing the N95 mask?

Dr. Sean:
Okay, when we are wearing the full gear, N95 is part of it, but those who do not have direct contact with patients, we do not wear N95, we wear the normal, surgical threeply mask.
And then it sounds very suffocating. I mean like, do any of the medical officers or anyone that they actually wear N95, because you said that the feeling is like you breath in the exhaled air. I mean like, is there something happening where they actually fainted because they wear all these PPE for too long or anything happened before?

Dr. Sean:

Well, I am very fortunate that, number one, within my team, nobody has fainted yet. We all will brief la, if you feel that you are not comfortable, if you feel like you need to take a break, you just raise your and say it: That’s it for me, I need to go off and take a break. Erm, so I am very fortunate that nobody has fainted yet.

Oh, yea. I mean like that sounds like a good idea because you let others to voice out if they feel uncomfortable. So, it really sounds time consuming and suffocating for wearing a full PPE. And actually we often came across a lot of posts and news on social media talking about this. So, actually I believe that in order for all these frontliners to work in such a working environment, it is very important to be mentally strong. So Dr. Sean, what do you think is the current mental health status of the frontliners? Because we feel that it must be a very stressful situation.

Dr. Sean:

Like you said this is a pandemic, of a scale that we have never encountered before. There are huge changes that are happening right now, for instance the MCO, so what we have to do is to adjust ourselves to the changes that are happening. Now, on a more microscopic scale, at the hospital level, there are staff being transferred, like myself being deployed to Hospital Permai, staff being transferred to SARI ward, staff being sent to amend ICU, etc. We all have to make adjustments in a short period of time. We also have to take into account that we, as healthcare workers, are also worried about contracting the disease. We live with our family members, some with their parents, some with their kids, is something that is always in our mind. In this kind of environment, in this kind of situation, some people are able to adjust quickly but this is not for everybody. Not everybody is able to adjust quickly. So it is very important that we actually have the empathy to be able to understand the issues that people are facing. To answer your question, there are a lot of people reporting increased scores in terms of stress and also anxiety and that is not something very good but I am very happy that we are actually coming up with measures such as Psychological First Aid, PFA that we are trying to support and assist in whatever way we can.
Xin En
I see. Dr, so means that the PFA actually becomes something like a major help for frontliners that showed increased scores in stress in this period of time?

Dr. Sean:
Yep.

Sheryl:
So, other than PFA, the psychological first aid which you mentioned just now, is there any coping mechanism or ways which you and your colleagues have been using to cope in this stressful situation?

Dr. Sean:
Yea, I mean you actually answer this question which is the coping mechanism. As a psychiatry medical officer, I will be speaking in terms of good coping mechanisms because it’s important to let off the steam at the end of the day. It could be as simple as listening to your favourite song, watching your favourite movie, perhaps drawing and posting a TikTok video or even telling a story - ventilating, to your friends and family. Just remember, it’s very important TO NOT BOTTLED EVERYTHING UP and to let things go at the end of the day. So you will need to find a coping mechanism which is suitable to you.

Sheryl:
I see. So, Dr Sean which is your preferred coping mechanism, as you listed quite a few just now.

Dr. Sean:
Well, I like to listen to music, listening to songs on my way back home, is my way of relaxing. That’s how I recharge myself. So by the time I reach home, I am actually quite fresh and ready to work at home. So, the work will include studying for my exams. But, listening to music is something I like to do everyday.

Sheryl:
Yea, listening to music and reading are actually quite good, I mean it’s a very good way to cope. Even in normal condition, these two ways have been very good modes to destress ourselves as well.

Xin En
Hmm, yes i agree. So Dr. Sean, from what you shared with us just now, it is very obvious that the current pandemic has actually taken a toll on the mental health of everyone, especially our health care workers. So actually what are the measures implemented by the government to protect our healthcare workers’ mental health? Or is there any?

Dr. Sean:
Well, we spoke about psychological first aid (PFA) just now, so I will just introduce to you what we have been doing in my hospital. So, how do we detect the condition of our staff? There are two ways. One is the active way whereby we actively sort out their condition. We have a questionnaire called DASS-21 questionnaire, we send this to every staff member, it’s completely anonymous of course, after they complete the survey and send (the questionnaire) back to us, we will see which score is abnormal. If someone is normal, in terms of the stress scale, the anxiety scale or the depression scale, meaning their things are manageable at the time being. But if someone has an abnormal (result), like an increase in anxiety or stress scores, we will contact the person, as they need to leave their contact number (when sending back the questionnaire to us), and find out more about the person. So this is the active way. Of course, this is the active way. The passive way, (the second way), we are doing is, we have a hotline and our hotline is always on, so if there is any healthcare issue our staff requires, they can contact us directly. Of course, our clinic is situated at Aras 2, Hospital Sultan Ismail. So if anybody needs help they can walk in as well and we will try to assist them, however this is only applicable to staff. I would like to talk more about PFA. So, what is PFA? PFA is actually a humane supportive and practical response to a fellow human being who is suffering from a serious stressor and who may require support. What PFA practitioners, like myself, do is to employ a look, listen and link action principle to identify the issues that are being faced by these people and we aim to mediate a resolution for them. Now, PFA is not a magic bullet that is able to solve all problems, it’s not! But, it’s a conduit to link the person to a potential solution. For your understanding, every hospital in Malaysia has their own PFA team, like myself, again, I’m on duty in Hospital Sultan Ismail (HSI) today. We’re working over time nowadays.
Xin En
Oh okay. So for this PFA, actually we know that Dr. Sean is involved in this PFA and Dr. Sean actually does this voluntarily, isn’t it?

Dr. Sean:
Well, it’s part of the job scope of the psychiatry and mental health unit. But of course, if I don’t want to do it, I will just say I don’t want to. It is a voluntary job, I wanted to do this as well.

Sheryl:
I see. Since you talked about the active and passive PFA, in your hospital, which type of PFA is more preferred or is being used, the active type or the passive type?

Dr. Sean:
In terms of reaching out to people / getting response, of course, the active type can get a bigger response. As we are approaching them by ourselves.

Sheryl:
Which means the active type of PFA is done on a regular basis right?

Dr. Sean:
Yea. So when the results come in, we will look at the result everyday, and (after viewing the results) perhaps give this person a phone call to find out what we can help in. That’s what we do. We just call them.

Sheryl:
So kind of like consultation and everything will go on?

Dr. Sean:
It’s not a formal consultation. This is just an informal conversation. So at the end of the conversation, we would have already listened to them, have an idea of what we need. We will discuss with them and see what is the potential solution we can have. It could be a formal consultation. It could be also us linking them to psychological services. There are a lot of things we can do from here.

Sheryl
It sounds very interesting! To be honest, this is my first time coming across this psychological first aid, I think this is an interesting field to explore further.

**Dr. Sean:**

It has been present for some years. It has been going on for quite some time. Just that it (PFA) is not quite prevalent in Malaysia until recently. Perhaps we can explore a session on how to do PFA in the future.

**Sheryl:**

Yes, I totally agree with this. So, in regards with mental health many channels have been made available for the public for them to seek help. As a fellow frontliner at the hospital, Dr. Sean, what would you suggest to the public to help improve mental health in this current situation?

**Dr. Sean:**

I think it’s very good and fortunate in Malaysia that there are quite a number of channels that we can log on to. For emotional support, BEFRIENDERS are always available. You guys can probably provide the hotline to the public later. BEFRIENDERS is always available for people to obtain emotional support from and also for people who are exposed to domestic abuse, TALIAN NUR is available as well. It is very important to speak up when a person has an issue and please I would like to say to everybody to not be hesitant to seek help if you feel like you need it. Because we are here to provide professional services and we will accept everyone to come and see us for our help.

**Sheryl:**

Totally agree with Dr. I have heard about BEFRIENDERS before. Before this COVID-19 outbreak, this organization has been quite active in receiving different kinds of calls. For example when one has suicidal ideation, they (BEFRIENDERS) also help, providing different kinds of support, Yea, of course, we will provide their hotline after this.

**Xin En**

Ya, Dr. Sean, so being a part of the frontliners, have you actually encountered any special occasions that inspire you or has caused a significant impact on your career, especially at these times?

**Dr. Sean:**
Well, it has been about six weeks since the beginning of my participation in this management of this pandemic and one thing I can say that is - I am grateful to contribute to the rakyat of Malaysia when we were short of personal protective equipment (PPE), the rakyat deliver; they raise funds, they DIY PPEs. They help to ensure our frontliners do not go into battle without armour. So, this is something really significant to me because as a civil servant, my primary goal is to serve the nation and its people. And the rakyat, at this time of need, showed that they appreciate and acknowledge our roles and they did their best to come and help us. So, it’s very nice to feel appreciated and I think this incident has spurred me on to improve myself so that I will be able to provide better service to the rakyat in the future. So, I am very touched by the contribution, by the gestures of our rakyat and I will do my best to specialize later and to provide my service to the rakyat, to give back to the people.

Xin En

I see. Ya, actually i think this is the first time, since the beginning of Covid-19, I have seen so many posts and actually news from Malaysians and people all around the world that they actually show their appreciation towards health care workers. In fact, this is the most, like one of the times where you can see that the appreciation is really obvious. And actually a lot of us, we actually feel very touched and we see it is something that is very touching and it actually influenced a lot of us.

Dr. Sean:
Oh, thank you.

Sheryl:
Yes, there is a very strong feeling that we are working this together and that we will make this out together as well. Before we end, Dr Sean, do you have anything you would like to remind or any last words for our audience?

Dr. Sean:
Hi, rakyat Malaysia! This is a difficult time for all of us. We all need to make lifestyle changes and many of these will become the new “normal”. Please wash x3 your friends frequently. Please practice good cough manners, cover your mouth before you cough or sneeze. Please adhere to social distancing. Even (after) the MCO is lifted, please do not join mass gathering for now. And also, perhaps it’s a good idea for us to wear masks when we leave our houses. I am positive that we will come out of this as a stronger and more nation-united. After a storm there will be a beautiful rainbow and we will all enjoy this beautiful rainbow together.

Xin En
Woah, what a significant sentence from Dr Sean. So, ya this actually marks the end of our session with Dr. Sean. So, here, we would like to thank Dr. Sean for your precious time and as requested by Dr. Sean, the latest hotline for Befrienders is actually 03-76272929 or you can email them, sam@befrienders.org.my and for Talian Nur hotline, which is also Talian Kasih, you can access them at 15999 or email them at tiankasih@kpwkm.gov.my. So, with this, on behalf of the MMI podcast team and our organisation Malaysian Medics International, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all the frontliners for all their hard work and we strongly believe that with our hands together, our nation can make this up.

Sheryl:
Yup! Thank you for tuning in, don’t forget to follow and rate our podcast on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. If you have any questions, comments or feedback, feel free to give us a shoutout on our Facebook page at Malaysian Medics International, till then - Stay tuned for next episode!

Xin En
And we hope to see you again.