Inside NCIS

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National University Cancer Institute Singapore

In Good Hands

ONCOLOGY MASSAGE

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Inside NCIS is a quarterly publication that celebrates the incredible people behind the incredible work we do to advance cancer care. If you have a story idea, reach out to us at NCIS_Transformation@nuhs.edu.sg.

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INCREDIBLE CARE

In Good Hands

Meet Christel Lim, the certified therapist behind NCIS' new oncology massage service. The hands that now bring comfort to our cancer patients were shaped by a journey that began years ago, by the bedside of a family member living with cancer.

Christel Lim never thought that caring for her mother-in-law would one day shape the course of her life.

Fifteen years ago, her mother-in-law, who was diagnosed with advanced non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, struggled with numbness and tingling in her hands from chemotherapy. As she became increasingly weak and reliant on a wheelchair, Christel would massage her daily to improve her circulation and provide relief.

"With peaceful music in the background, the massage was a blessed time, a wonderful respite in a difficult palliative journey," she recalls. "Both of us looked forward to each session."

The experience left a lasting impression and set Christel on a new career path - one that has led her to become the therapist behind NCIS' new oncology massage service.

A calling beyond numbers

Before becoming a massage therapist, Christel worked in corporate tax and financial accounting. But after taking a long break from the workforce to raise her children, she found herself seeking a more meaningful direction.

In 2021, she took up a Diploma in Holistic Massage and worked as a home and spa therapist in a five-star hotel. Christel then went on to pursue further training in sports and postnatal massage, as well as stretch therapy. This opened up opportunities for her to work alongside physiotherapy teams in supporting the rehabilitation of post-surgical orthopaedic patients and individuals with various musculoskeletal conditions.

Yet, her time caring for her mother-in-law remained close to her heart.

"I remembered how my mother-in-law benefitted from massage therapy, and I hoped to help other cancer patients as well," Christel says.

Fulfilling her passion

When Christel learnt that NCIS was exploring the idea of introducing oncology massage to support its patients, she underwent specialised training to build the skills needed for the service.

This included obtaining certifications in breast cancer rehabilitation and lymphoedema therapy, before she went on to become a qualified oncology massage therapist under Susan Findlay, a recognised leader in the field. During this period, Christel learnt how to adapt her massage techniques for cancer patients, including those with low platelet levels, blood clot risks, surgical incisions and fragile skin.

Safety first
At NCIS, every massage session begins with a comprehensive assessment.

Patients complete an intake form detailing their cancer diagnosis, treatment history and any ongoing medical concerns. Information such as radiation sites, skin fragility, use of medical devices, lymphoedema and tumour locations is carefully reviewed to develop a treatment plan tailored to a patient's individual needs.

"The first 10 minutes will be spent going through the intake form and agreeing with the patient on the objectives and what to expect," Christel explains.

Unlike conventional massage, the focus is not on applying a standard set of methods, but on ensuring every aspect of the session is catered to the individual's condition, symptoms and stage of care.

Techniques used may include myofascial release to help improve mobility and ease tissue tightness, manual lymphatic drainage to help manage swelling or lymphoedema, and trigger point therapy that targets sensitive knots or tight bands within muscles.

Deep pressure is avoided because it may increase the risk of bruising or injury and exert additional stress on a body already coping with the

physical impact of cancer and treatment.

Therapists regularly check in with patients to ensure they remain comfortable throughout the session.

Debunking myths

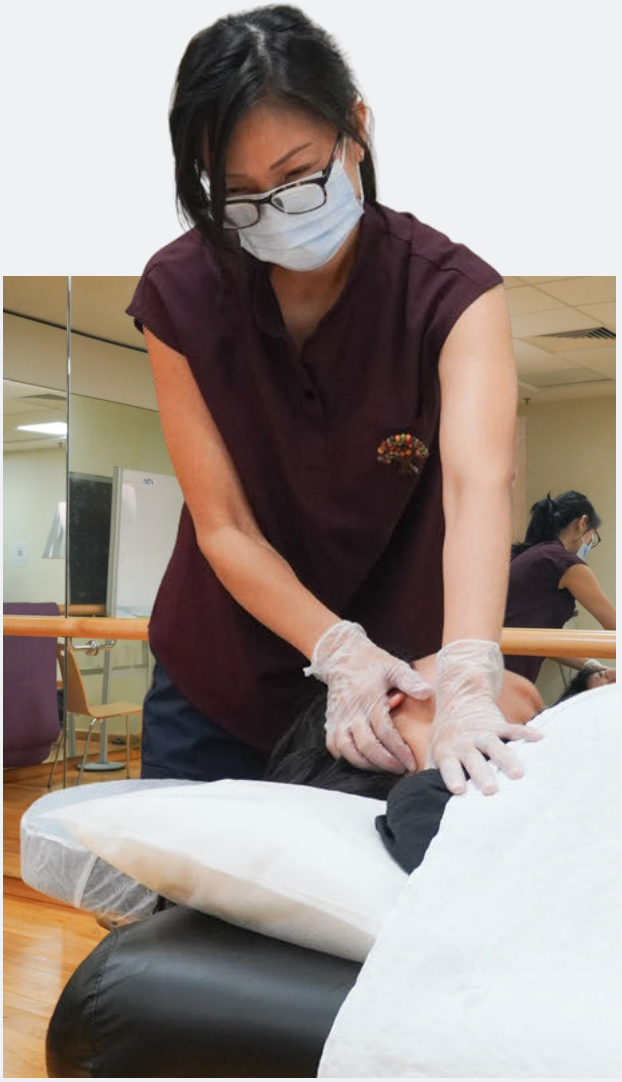
Some of the misconceptions Christel encounters are that people with cancer should avoid massage, or that massage can cause the cancerous cells to spread.

“There are many out there who still consider the claims as the absolute truth. There is no credible evidence that supports them,” Christel states.

Rather, the benefits of such sessions are well-documented. These include reduced anxiety, better sleep quality and improved emotional wellbeing.

Patients interested in trying oncology massage should speak with their oncologist first, Christel advises, to determine whether it is suitable for them.

The launch of the oncology massage service at NCIS is becoming part of a broader shift towards integrative care, where complementary therapies are offered alongside treatment to enhance patients’ quality of life.



For Christel, the journey has come full-circle. The same hands that once comforted her mother-in-law now support others navigating cancer — providing comfort the same way she did 15 years ago.

Launched on 24 April 2026, the oncology massage service at NCIS is currently only available for NCIS patients, and requires a referral from their NCIS doctors.

INCREDIBLE CARE X INCREDIBLE PEOPLE

#NCISCares

From glass decal workshops to yoga, NCIS marked its second Wellness Month with a diverse lineup of activities designed to support the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of our staff.

At NCIS, we believe that looking after our staff is just as important as caring for our patients.

The Wellness Month held from 15 June to 10 July 2026 reflects our ongoing commitment to fostering a supportive and healthy workplace where staff can thrive.

By creating opportunities to recharge, learn new skills and connect with one another, we hope to encourage everyone to prioritise their wellbeing, build resilience and continue bringing their best selves to work each day.

Something for everyone

Close to 250 of our staff took part in a range of activities specially curated to help them relax and recharge. They explored the art of latte making, created snow globes and mosaic coasters, and designed their own terrariums. They could also treat themselves to a back and foot massage, and take part in a 100,000 steps challenge to stay active.

Check out the photos on the next page to see what our colleagues were up to during our NCIS Wellness Month!

The five domains of wellbeing

NCIS strives to promote staff wellbeing through the following domains outlined by the NUHS Wellbeing Office.

Social

Having healthy working relationships and personally caring about our colleagues.

Financial

Having control and the ability to manage our finances.

Psychological/Emotional

Being aware of our emotions and thoughts, and the ability to manage stress. Support is available when needed.

Professional

Feeling engaged at work, finding job satisfaction and meaning in our work at NCIS.

Physical

Practicing self-care; making balanced nutrition, sufficient rest and regular exercise a priority.

INCREDIBLE PEOPLE

Four Decades and Counting

In May this year, Senior Enrolled Nurse Saroja Devi was honoured with the Long Service Award in recognition of her 40 years of dedicated service at NUH. Her journey offers a rare glimpse into a career spanning four decades in healthcare, shaped by change, growth and an unwavering commitment to caring for others.

Few people can say they have spent 40 years working in Singapore's healthcare system. Even fewer can say that they have done so across as many roles as Saroja Devi.

She began her career as a patient care assistant when the National University Hospital (NUH) first opened in 1985. Then, she moved on to become a cardiac technician in the heart centre, where she stayed for 18 years.

As she assisted patients with procedures such as ECGs, blood pressure checks and Holter monitoring tests, Saroja found herself increasingly drawn to the opportunity to play a more direct role in patient care.

That was when she decided to become a nurse.

Saroja underwent two years of studies at the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and was posted to a gynaecology ward. She later joined NCIS in 2006, back when it was known as The Cancer Institute.

Today, as a Senior Enrolled Nurse, Saroja supports treatment procedures, assesses patients' conditions and works closely with doctors and multidisciplinary teams to ensure that every patient receives the best care possible.

"When I first started, nursing was very task-focused," she recalls. "Now it involves a broader understanding of patients and their holistic needs beyond clinical treatment."

Holding firm to her values

Across four decades of service, Saroja has remained guided by compassion, patience, respect and teamwork in everything she does.

“Every patient deserves dignity and kindness, regardless of their circumstances,” she says. “To deliver safe, high-quality care, everyone in the team needs to support one another.”

As a senior nurse, Saroja mentors her junior colleagues by providing practical lessons, encouraging questions and helping them build confidence.

Enrolled Nurse Khin Saw Htwe (pictured left) can attest to this.

“When I was pretty new, I almost made a mistake while taking blood samples, but Saroja explained to me gently how to do it properly. She is always approachable and ready to answer all my queries,” she shares.

Saroja also likes to remind her younger peers that learning takes time, and every experience gained contributes to growth.

That belief has been reinforced throughout her own career, where she has seen the healthcare landscape change significantly. Nursing has become more evidence-based, while advances in technology have transformed daily practice, from electronic medical records to new treatment options.

Adapting to change
Through structured programmes, workshops and workplace learning, NCIS and NUH have kept staff abreast of evolving practices across the years.

For Saroja, the essence of nursing remains unchanged.

“The heart of nursing is still caring for people. “From a young age, I was inspired by nurses and how they make a difference during difficult moments in patients’ lives,” she says.

When reflecting on her career, Saroja does not single out a defining moment as her proudest. Instead, she points to the relationships built with patients, families and colleagues as the most meaningful part of her job.

Lessons for the next generation
For younger nurses entering the profession, Saroja’s advice is simple: stay open to learning, communicate well, and remember the purpose behind the work.

After all, a career spanning 40 years is built on sustained habits, and the commitment to keep showing up for those who need you.

INCREDIBLE RESEARCH

Advancing Treatment for Clear Cell Cancers

A study by A/Prof David Tan (pictured right), Dr Natalie Ngoi (pictured left) and other clinicians and scientists from Singapore and South Korea has shown promising results in combating clear cell gynaecological cancers.

For patients with recurrent clear cell cancers of the ovary and endometrium, treatment options have long been limited. These rare cancer subtypes are difficult to treat, often responding poorly to chemotherapy.

Now, an international clinical trial led by clinicians and scientists from Singapore and South Korea is helping to change that.

Called the LARA trial, the study found that combining pembrolizumab and lenvatinib resulted in encouraging tumour responses among patients whose clear cell ovarian and endometrial cancers had returned following previous treatment.

The Phase 2 trial enrolled 25 patients, with 40 percent experiencing significant tumour shrinkage within the first 24 weeks of treatment. Patients also achieved a median progression-free survival of 6.4 months, while side effects were manageable and no treatment-related deaths were reported.

One of the patients was Australian Caitlyn Delaney. While the treatment did not cure her disease, it helped keep her cancer stable for nearly two and a half years, allowing her to continue exercising, spending time with loved ones and advocating for fellow patients.

Study impact

The findings provide the first Asia-led multicentre evidence supporting this treatment combination in these rare and difficult-to-treat cancers, helping to address an important unmet need in a region where clear cell ovarian cancer is more common than in many Western countries.

“That is why exploring this combination matters as it could offer a much-needed option to better outcomes," says A/Prof David Tan, Senior Consultant from the Department of Haematology-Oncology in NCIS.

Building on the encouraging findings, the research team is now working to get the treatment combination included inside the US National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) guidelines, which would support subsequent efforts to make it accessible to patients in Singapore.

What are clear cell cancers?

Clear cell cancers are a type of cancer named after how the tumour cells look under a microscope.

Clear cell cancers most commonly occur in the ovary and endometrium, and are often more resistant to standard chemotherapy compared with other gynaecological cancers.

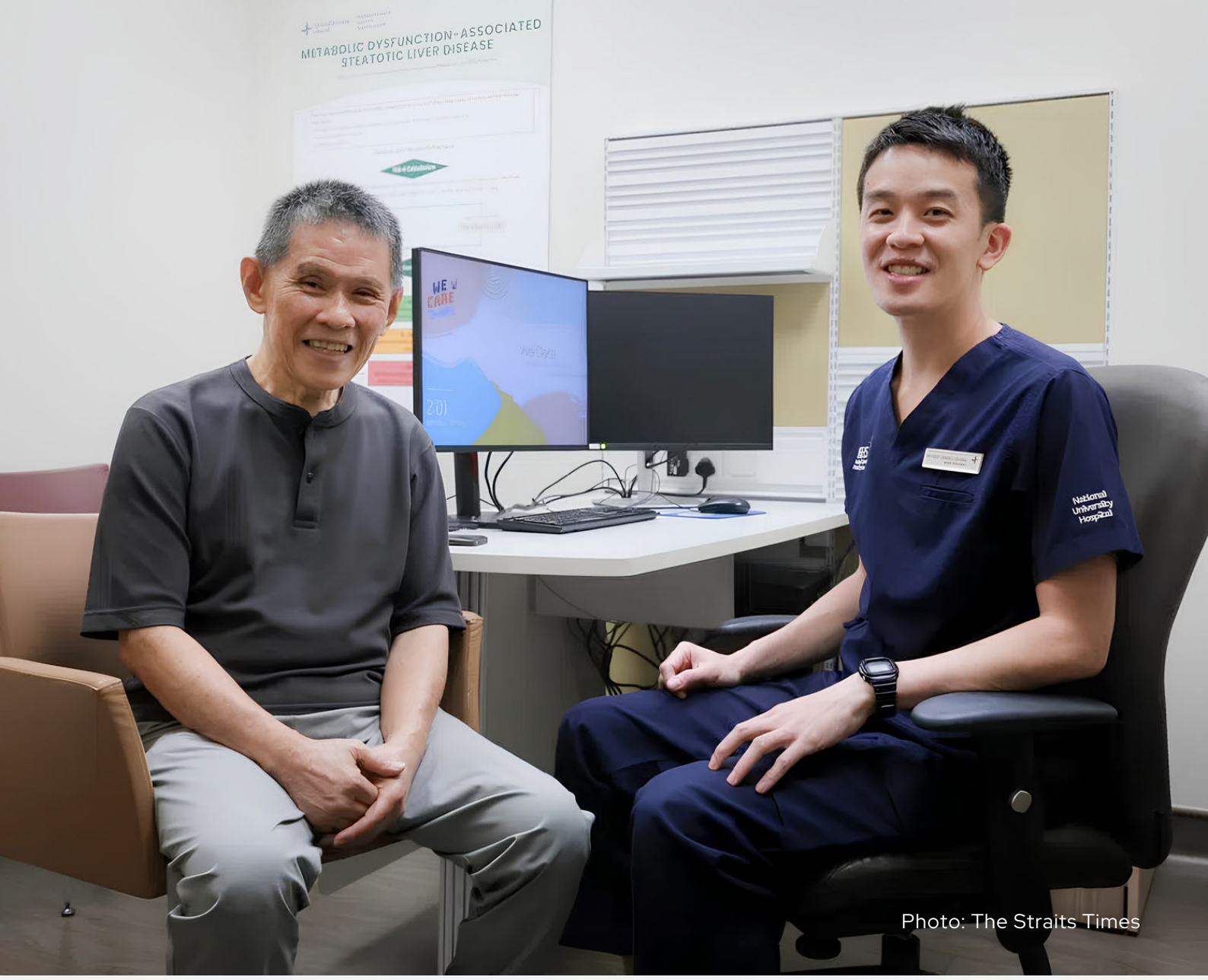


Photo: The Straits Times

INCREDIBLE RESEARCH

Fatty Liver, Diabetes and Obesity Increase Liver Cancer Risk

A study led by Adj A/Prof Daniel Huang (right, pictured) has found that people with a genetic tendency to develop fatty liver are at a higher risk of liver cancer if they also have metabolic conditions such as diabetes and obesity.

Published in May in *Alimentary Pharmacology and Therapeutics*, a leading international journal in gastroenterology, the findings come from nearly 25,000 participants from the Singapore Chinese Health Study, a cohort established since 1993 for research on cancer and other important chronic diseases in Singapore and across the globe.

Previously, individuals at risk of liver cancer were assessed based on either fatty liver or metabolic conditions, but not both together, says Adj A/Prof Daniel Huang, the study's principal investigator.

"Our findings show that diabetes and obesity effectively "stack" on top of genetic susceptibility to further increase liver cancer risk. This highlights the importance of considering genetic factors together with information from routine medical checks, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and being overweight, rather than viewing them separately." he says.

Adj A/Prof Daniel Huang is a Senior Consultant from the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Medicine in NUH and Chair of the Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary Cancer Programme at NCIS.

He and his team of researchers also found that men with excess fat around their abdomen faced a higher risk of developing hepatocellular carcinoma, the most common type of primary liver cancer. This is linked to the buildup of visceral fat, which surrounds internal organs, including the liver.

Future implications

Genetic testing is currently not included in routine liver cancer screening in Singapore.

Findings from this study, however, suggests that combining genetic information with existing health data from regular medical checks could help doctors develop more personalised screening approaches in the future.

This could allow healthcare providers to identify individuals who may need closer monitoring, including those who may not be considered high risk under current screening practices.

Did you know?

According to the Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Report in 2023, liver cancer is the fifth most common type of cancer for men in Singapore from 2019 to 2023. It is also one of the top five leading causes of cancer-related deaths in both men and women.

Liver cancer can be challenging to detect in its early stages, as symptoms often do not appear until the disease has advanced.

National University Cancer Institute Singapore

Thank You for Reading!

Let us know what you think of this issue by sharing your feedback at NCIS_Transformation@nuhs.edu.sg.