

Inside NCIS

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National University
Cancer Institute
Singapore

RELAY FOR LIFE 2026:

Running for Mama



Table of Contents

03

Incredible Care

RUNNING FOR MAMA

06

Incredible Care

RELAY FOR LIFE

09

Incredible People

SERVING WITH DISTINCTION

13

Incredible People

LIGHTING THE FIRST SPARK

17

Incredible Research

**BOOSTING SURVIVAL FOR
BLOOD CANCER PATIENTS**



INCREDIBLE CARE

Running for Mama

Resident Physician Dr Puteri Zatil took part in her first Relay for Life in honour of her late mother who passed away from endometrial cancer. Blending personal loss with professional purpose, she reflects on how her mother's journey continues to shape the way she cares for patients — and why every step on the track carries meaning beyond the race.

In the wee hours of Sunday morning, while most of Singapore was asleep, Dr Puteri Zatil laced up her running shoes and stepped onto the tracks at the National Stadium.

Taking part in the Singapore Cancer Society and Tamarind Health's Relay for Life for the first time, she joined hundreds of others in a symbolic overnight race to celebrate cancer survivors, remember loved ones lost, and fight back against the disease.

The motivation to run was both professional and personal.

Beyond doing it for her patients, Dr Zatil was running in honour of her mother, who passed away from Stage IV endometrial cancer in 2022.

Remembering Mama

Her mother's influence continues to shape not just who she is, but how she practises medicine.

"She was the compass that always pointed me toward compassion and strength," she shares. "Her cancer journey taught me that a patient is never just a diagnosis, but a person with a story and a family."

That perspective now guides her work as a resident physician, where she strives to extend to every patient the same care and empathy she would have wanted for her own mother.

Some memories remain especially vivid. Especially when Hari Raya comes around.

"I cherish the time spent cooking traditional dishes alongside my mother and three sisters, followed by the joy of sitting down together for our meal," she recalls.

Honouring Mama

That morning, Dr Zatil carried those moments with her, and more, over ten 200m sprint relays, covering a total distance of 2km.

The race was not without its hurdles.

Navigating between lanes meant constantly adjusting her pace, weaving through runners moving at varying speeds.

"It struck me as a powerful reflection of the cancer journey — unpredictable, requiring constant adaptation filled with different trajectories for everyone involved," she notes.

Despite taking the 3 a.m slot to run, Dr Zatil describes her first experience in the relay as an incredible one.

"I felt a deep sense of pride in stepping up to the challenge. Even as my heart raced and my legs began to ache, my main focus was simply to give my absolute best for the team, our patients and the cause we are supporting," she says.



Events like Relay for Life underscore Dr Zatil's belief that medicine is only one part of a cancer patient's journey. Community, emotional support and the visibility that comes from being seen and acknowledged all play an equally important role in how they cope and heal.

We asked her how her mother would react if she saw her at the National Stadium that morning.

"She was always my biggest cheerleader," she says. "I think she would tell me to keep going, to take care of my health — and she'd give me that 'proud mother' look that always gave me strength."

Carrying on from her mother's legacy, Dr Zatil hopes that her patients never lose hope.

"You are so much more than a diagnosis, and you are never walking this path alone. Your NCIS team is behind you. We continue to race towards a future where every patient has the best possible support, care and quality of life."



INCREDIBLE CARE

Relay for Life

#TeamNCIS turned out in full force at this year's Relay for Life with its largest contingent yet. Check out the infographic and photos below to see how the team performed in the 100km overnight challenge.

In Numbers: NCIS' Participation in Relay for Life 2026

Number of Runners:

128

Total Distance Covered:

165.2KM

Overall Position:

8th

Amount of Money Raised:

\$13,160





Distinction Award

Priscillia Koe Jie Xin

National University Cancer Institute, Singapore



Source: Singapore Clinical Research Institute (SCRI)

INCREDIBLE PEOPLE

Serving with Distinction

Senior Clinical Research Coordinator (CRC) Priscillia Koe was the sole recipient of the Certificate of Distinction at the Singapore Clinical Research Institute's Distinguished Contributor Award ceremony in February this year. We spoke with her to uncover the passion and dedication that drive her efforts to bring better treatment options to patients.

What was supposed to be just an unassuming tin of Hershey's dark chocolates has turned into an enduring reminder of Priscillia Koe's purpose in NCIS.

Years ago, a patient with Stage 4 breast cancer gifted the chocolates to her after noticing that she often skipped meals between back-to-back appointments. The patient had deliberately chosen the 50g tin from Hershey's range of products — small enough to fit into Priscillia's white coat pocket so she could take a few bites whenever she was hungry.

After the patient passed on, Priscillia decided to keep the empty tin.

"It made me feel genuinely cared for and appreciated. Over time, the tin became a reminder of the meaningful connections I build with patients, and the efforts I put in to make a difference," she says.

Priscillia's unwavering commitment to the profession recently earned her the Certificate of Distinction for the Singapore Clinical Research Institute's Distinguished Contributor Award — the institute's highest level of recognition for CRCs.

Shaped by Science and Service

Her journey into clinical research began during university, where she developed a strong interest in cancer biology.

At the same time, she also wanted to improve her communication skills.

"Being a CRC allows me to pursue both of these interests," she admits.

As Priscillia grew into the role, supporting her patients through their treatment journeys became a source of joy and fulfillment.

"Seeing their smiles and receiving their warm greetings affirm my belief that the work I do truly matters."

But clinical research, she notes, is often misunderstood.

"Some see it as 'extra' or non-essential, and research participants as 'lab rats'. However, clinical research is where the future of medicine is shaped."

From safeguarding data integrity to ensuring regulatory compliance, the responsibilities carried by CRCs are significant, even if much of their tasks



happen behind-the-scenes.

“A missed research sample or incomplete data can affect study outcomes,” she explains. “It ultimately impacts the treatments and standards of care.”

Finding Strength in Loss

Working closely with these patients means confronting the possibility of losing them one day. When such situations happen, Priscillia finds strength in knowing that she served them wholeheartedly without regrets.

“Ensuring proper closure at the point where the patient exits from the clinical trial also plays a significant role in helping myself and the patient’s family members remain composed and supported,” she adds.

Throughout her journey in this field, Priscillia credits her faith as a guiding force. She also points to the influence of mentors such as Professor Lee Soo Chin and Adj A/Prof Andrea Wong in her professional and personal growth.

Fourteen years since she first stepped into NCIS, Priscillia’s duties now extend beyond patient support. As a senior CRC, she supervises a team of coordinators, oversees workload management, trains interns, and leads orientation and on-the-job training for new hires.



A Fulfilling Career Awaits

For those starting out, Priscillia is candid about the realities they will face.

“The role of a CRC is undeniably challenging, often demanding patience, resilience, and adaptability,” she says. “Much of it involves closing operational gaps, navigating complexities, and serving as the bridge between doctors, patients, and various stakeholders.”

Yet, she emphasises that each task contributes to a larger outcome that can transform the lives of patients and advance the wider medical community.

While Priscillia continues to make a mark in her career, the bonds she builds along the way remind her that even the smallest gestures, like offering a thoughtful box of chocolates, can make a profound and lasting impact.



INCREDIBLE PEOPLE

Lighting the First Spark

Dr Ivy Ng was the first NCIS staff to receive the NCIS Spark Award, an educational sponsorship programme, when it was launched last year.

She shares more about her motivation to pursue further studies and her hopes for the future in this story.

For Dr Ivy Ng, teaching has always been a natural extension of her clinical practice.

A consultant in the Department of Radiation Oncology at NCIS, Dr Ng also serves as a Clinical Assistant Professor at NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. There, she trains medical students in patient communication and supervises those doing their placement in radiation oncology.

But as her career progresses, Dr Ng is taking on responsibilities that extend beyond just that.

In her roles as Deputy Director of Education at NCIS and Training Network Director for the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists (RANZCR), she is increasingly involved in shaping the systems, culture and policies that define how learning takes place.

Dr Ng's pivot towards education leadership led her to apply for the NCIS Spark Award. She is currently pursuing a Master of Health Professions Education programme at Monash University.

The Spark Award is NCIS' educational sponsorship programme. It is designed to recognise and support individuals with exceptional talent and dedication to advance the skills necessary for a rapidly evolving landscape in cancer research, diagnosis, and treatment.

With the upcoming transition of local radiation oncology training to a residency model, the Master of Health Professions Education programme will enhance her skillsets in curriculum and faculty development, assessment and feedback systems, as well as trainee wellbeing.

It will also equip her with the knowledge required to develop scalable oncology training frameworks for the region, and ensure that innovation and AI are introduced under proper supervision.

Dr Ng already sees several ways to apply what she learns in NCIS.

First, she hopes to strengthen curriculum design by moving towards intentional, competency-based training with clearer developmental milestones.

Second, she aims to support consultants with practical tools to teach effectively without increasing burnout.

Third, she plans to ensure more structured feedback and integrate AI in ways that enhance, rather than replace, human supervision.

"Ultimately, my goal is to translate educational theory to improve both trainee experience and patient care," she says.

What Makes an Exceptional Educator?

Having won the Great Teacher Award in 2024 and the Dean's Award for Teaching Excellence in 2023, Dr Ng believes that incredible educators do more than simply transfer knowledge.

"They see potential before it's visible. They create psychological safety while maintaining high standards. They design and remove friction in the learning process."

Finding the balance, Dr Ivy maintains, is delicate. Excellence without compassion, she explains, breeds fear, while compassion without standards limits growth.



To prevent either from taking root, Dr Ng now places greater emphasis on deliberate practice, improving feedback literacy and inculcating a growth mindset.

"In many ways, the question has shifted from 'How do I teach well?' to 'How do I build environments where others thrive?'," she shares.

Strengthening NCIS as an Academic Medical Centre

With this in mind, Dr Ng feels that there are multiple opportunities to strengthen the organisation's academic standing in ways that benefit both staff and partners, such as:

- Aligning education with research and practice excellence to ensure that learning is evidence-based and directly relevant to patient care;
- Investing in structured faculty development to help clinicians become more effective educators, enhancing the overall quality of teaching;
- Positioning Singapore as a hub for oncology education to strengthen regional leadership, where NCIS shares comprehensive programmes and fosters cross-border collaboration.

“An academic medical centre is defined not only by research output, but by how intentionally it develops people,” she says.

Encouraging Lifelong Learning

For anyone who is passionate about self-improvement but hesitant to take the next step, Dr Ng offers a simple piece of advice: just follow your curiosity.

“Further education is about sharpening how you think,” she adds. While it requires commitment, the investment individuals make in their own learning can create a ripple effect on others.

As the first recipient of NCIS' educational sponsorship award, Dr Ivy has ignited a spark for others to follow and create an even greater impact on the lives of the people they serve.

What is the NCIS Spark Award?

As part of our talent development efforts, the NCIS Spark Award supports staff with exceptional talent to develop the critical skills and innovation necessary for a rapidly evolving landscape in cancer research, diagnosis and treatment by investing in their education and training.



INCREDIBLE RESEARCH

Boosting Survival for Blood Cancer Patients

A study led by A/Prof Koh Liang Piu found that removing harmful TCR $\alpha\beta$ T cells that are known to trigger graft-versus-host disease (GVHD) and reintroducing protective CD45RA-depleted memory T cells can improve outcomes in haploidentical stem cell transplants.

This approach, which was carried out on 145 patients between January 2017 and July 2023, led to robust engraftment and low rates of severe GVHD, infections, and relapse. At 28 months' follow-up, three-year overall, survival, event-free survival, as well as GVHD and relapse-free survival were 67%, 62%, and 59% respectively — demonstrating significant improvement compared with standard GVHD prevention methods.

The findings, which were published in *Bone Marrow Transplantation* in January, highlight the treatment's potential to better balance safety and disease control. Learn more about this breakthrough in the link [here](#).

Thank You for Reading!

Let us know what you think of this issue by sharing your feedback at
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