

# “Working As ONE TEAM”

“Working As One Team” is a series of stories that features how departments build teamwork. The camaraderie leads to a more positive work environment where everyone works towards the shared goal of delivering incredible care to our patients.

## Fostering open and transparent communication

Performing over 7,000 surgeries annually, ranging from mild to complex cases, the Department of Ophthalmology bustles with activity all year round. Ensuring everything runs hiccups-free takes a dedicated and responsive team—a feat made possible through open and transparent communication.

A/Prof Victor Koh, the Head & Senior Consultant at the department, attributes their success to a philosophy underpinned by three core pillars: a flat hierarchy, proactive engagement and decisive action.

At the department, an open-door policy is the mainstay. Doing without these “walls” that can sometimes pose as barriers to communication, everyone feels safe to voice their concerns. This is particularly pertinent when making important departmental decisions. “To get everyone’s buy-in, we keep an open mind and listen to each idea with intent—even alternative ones—and consider them during the decision-making process,” he says. The team also makes it a point to explain why certain decisions are made to maintain transparency.

“Spending time with colleagues outside of work—enjoying good food, a few drinks and friendly banter—helps to form strong friendships over time. This eventually creates an enjoyable workplace where help is always nearby when needed, allowing us to provide the best patient care possible as a cohesive team.”

*Dr Tong Weihan*  
Resident



“The department has been incredibly supportive, not only in my academic pursuits but also by taking a personal interest in my overall well-being. When I was going through a difficult time balancing exam preparation with caring for a family member with health issues, numerous seniors and peers regularly checked in to see how I was coping. Some even took on several of my administrative duties. Many others also made time in their busy schedules to help with my exam preparation, journeying with me through the ups and downs of residency. I’m beyond grateful to be working with colleagues whom I can also call my friends.”

*Dr Debbie Goh*  
Resident

Delivering difficult decisions is never easy. The team believes in filtering these decisions through thorough reasoning and consultation. “When we have to break bad news, we meet with senior figures in the department to seek their advice and explain why the decision is necessary. During the announcement, we outline the underlying reasons and impacts, and demonstrate that other scenarios were considered,” A/Prof Victor adds. “If a decision turns out to be wrong, we take accountability and then pivot from there.”

This deep-rooted culture of openness has been honed over many years, with efforts made to know team members personally and help them find fulfilment in their roles. This ensures the entire team is aligned and driven by a common goal. “Our predecessors have set the stage, and we continue to make refinements so that we can function even better as a team,” adds A/Prof Victor. For example, the HoD works closely with his core team and through the clinical director, Dr Charmaine Chai, implements plans with an active feedback loop and a finger on the pulse.

Looking ahead, the team hopes to continue advocating for staff welfare. As the department grows, bringing in more like-minded individuals who share this culture will be crucial to seizing golden opportunities for departmental improvement.



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## Fostering comfort and confidence

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When I first joined NUH last year, I struggled with the culture and communication, particularly with my preceptor Ajitha. My anxiety grew until our Nurse Manager asked for feedback and encouraged me to open up. She also arranged for sessions for me to clear the air with Ajitha. The session helped us understand each other better. Now, with my colleagues’ support, I feel more confident and motivated to keep going despite the challenges.

*Josie Roldan Sapa*

Staff Nurse

In the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), creating a nurturing environment is always top of mind. After all, the nature of the work requires a team that is not only skilled but also supportive and empathetic. Making every team member feel heard, respected and valued is crucial.

The NICU team is characterised by its diverse mix of nationalities. To help new non-local nurses settle in, the leaders including ADoN Lee Heng Pheng, ADoN Sarah Ho-Lim, SNM Roslin Bte Rothman and SNC Lee Soke Lee, make it a point to ensure that they are paired with preceptors from their own country whenever possible. This buddy system makes them feel more at home and supported as they adjust to life in Singapore.

There is a system in place to ensure that new nurses are well supported through regular check-ins with their reporting officers. “As they warm up and get themselves comfortable, they gradually integrate with the rest of the team,” says Sarah.

Building confidence is a big focus. Junior nurses are encouraged to share their ideas—fostering an environment where everyone feels their contributions matter. Regular engagement sessions, both formal and informal, play a big part in building this culture.



Conflicts are inevitable in any team, but the NICU team handles them through open dialogue and mutual understanding. In one instance, a junior nurse felt uncomfortable with her preceptor. Rather than swapping preceptors at the get-go, the team arranged to meet the pair to understand their concerns. Through these sessions, both nurses had a chance to see things through each other’s lenses—which ultimately helped to strengthen the bond between them.

“When issues are escalated to us, we meet the staff, hear them out and explain what we understand, also asking if there’s anything they’d like to add,” says Soke Yee. “We encourage them to share their thoughts with us. It’s not about making hasty decisions like changing their preceptor at a whim. We know it takes time for some of them to settle in—and so we work with them to find a win-win solution.”

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Josie had a hard time adjusting when she first arrived—overwhelmed by the fast-paced environment and feeling homesick. Initially, I was not aware that she was intimidated by my approach. After understanding her struggles, I adjusted my teaching methods and was more patient with her. Now, Josie is doing well, and we’ve grown much closer—sharing both professional and personal difficulties and going on breaks together!

*Masilamani Ajitha*

Senior Staff Nurse



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## The three pillars of values, communication, and fulfilment

Having a cohesive and motivated team is the lifeblood of any healthcare setting. At the National University Centre for Oral Health, Singapore (NUCOHS), the team thrives on three key principles: values, communication, and fulfilment.

A respectful and collaborative culture is at the core of the NUCOHS team. Setting the gears of values in motion, the team has restructured itself by breaking down larger teams into smaller, more manageable groups. “In the past, each team had over 20 dental assistants under one leader, which may not be ideal,” says Ms Sandy Ho, the Assistant Chief Operating Officer at NUCOHS. “Now every clinic has at least two team leaders, each overseeing about 10 to 12 people. This has improved support and communication within the teams.” Additionally, some senior staff have taken on advisory roles, further enhancing team cohesion.

Communication is another cornerstone of NUCOHS’s team culture. They keep things lively with bi-weekly and quarterly meetings that reinforce positive behaviours and address issues raised by the staff. These gatherings are a great platform for open dialogue, letting team members voice their concerns and share ideas. The team has put in place a fun, light-hearted internal newsletter that starts conversations about various hobbies and personal interests. “Our newsletter is all about giving everyone a break from the heavy stuff and fostering connections through shared interests,” says Sandy.

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I’ve been with the institution for more than 15 years and have worked with many colleagues. One thing has always been constant: teamwork. I’ve always felt supported, knowing someone has my back. I’ve had mentors who were patient and kind I strive to be the same to my new colleagues, guiding them with patience and kindness.

*Julia Tupari*

Assistant Clinic Supervisor

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We had a dialogue session with Senior Management in June where we were encouraged to share our thoughts—work processes, interactions among colleagues, or suggestions for improvement. I find this kind of meet-up to be a nice step towards better collaboration. Our leaders have a better understanding of the challenges we face daily and how they can help create a better workplace.

*Doris Foo*

Patient Service Coordinator

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When it comes to job fulfilment, NUCOHS places a strong emphasis on continuous professional development. Initiatives that have been implemented include a ‘Discipline Competency Checklist’ to improve technical skills and customised training programmes based on the developmental needs of individual staff. Team members are nominated to be part of workgroups, committees, and projects to hone their leadership skills.

To support wellbeing, NUCOHS organises a plethora of health and wellness activities throughout the year. From team-bonding activities to sports days to celebrations tied to cultural events, the department’s yearly calendar is brimming with events to help ensure everyone feel appreciated and connected.

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In the Central Sterile Supply Department, we’re tasked to reprocess instruments for various departments. There was once during the pandemic, when many colleagues were on medical leave, and our steriliser broke down. This could have caused delays in the processing of instruments, and delay in delivery of these items to the departments.

The team came together to help one another and we were able to meet all department requests on time. This incident helped build a stronger bond within the team.

*Kartini Bte Mohamed*

Senior Health Attendant

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