

## The Electric New Paper :

# Small in size, big in heart

**IMH nurse honoured for helping aggressive patients with care and empathy**

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**25 November 2008**

THE man was angrily shouting at everyone in his ward at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

The patient, who was in his 30s, refused to talk to anyone and it seemed like nobody could control him.

Even the male nurses were wary of him.

Then Madam Soonthammal Nallapan stepped in.

The petite nurse, who weighs just 50kg, calmly spoke to the man and took him aside.

Madam Soonthammal, 46, said: 'I felt a little afraid at first because he looked bigger than me. But I was sure the other nurses could help me if needed.'

'I then asked him to have a drink with me. I asked him what he would like to drink, a cold or hot drink.'

'The man told me he wanted a cold drink and I got him one. Then we sat down together and chatted.'

Her ability to use her wit to calmly deal with difficult patients is one of the qualities that helped Madam Soonthammal win the Challenge Trophy for this year's Tan Chin Tuan Nursing Awards.

Recounting the episode with the patient, she said that by chatting with him, she found out that he did not like the side effects from his medication.

She said: 'I told him that I would tell the doctors treating him to give him medication to curb the side effects. He slowly quietened down and, after half an hour of talking, he was more stable.'

When Madam Soonthammal, a mother of two sons aged 18 and 20, saw the man two days later, she was surprised at his changed appearance.

She said: 'The doctors had reviewed his medication and he was more stable and less angry, and looked happier. He later even wrote IMH a letter of appreciation for my help.'

With her small build, you would think she would be at the mercy of big aggressive patients.

While she sometimes suffered minor bruises from such encounters, she said she enjoyed working at IMH.

Indeed, she had asked to be transferred to IMH in 2001, after more than 15 years at other hospitals.

She said: 'I asked for IMH because I feel more satisfaction caring for psychiatric patients. It is rewarding to see how they respond to you when you advise them and counsel them.'

'It is even more rewarding when the advice helps them and they come for fewer follow-up appointments as a result.'

At IMH, Madam Soonthrammall spent six years handling male patients and started working with female patients only last year.

She said: 'Female patients are more loving and caring, they will be concerned if you look tired and tell you to go for your break. Male patients are less so.'

Madam Soonthrammall said the key to her good relationship with IMH patients boils down to building rapport and a good interpersonal relationship with them.

She said: 'I try to take them to one side and talk to them. I build rapport and do my best to keep any promises I make to them.'

### **Patients come first**

Saving lives is also all in a day's work for her.

In 2003, she saw a walk-in patient stuffing himself with bread at breakfast.

She said: 'The young man was eating fast and soon showed symptoms of choking. I saw his mouth was still filled with bread. I first took out the bread from his mouth with my hands. Then I did the Heimlich manoeuvre and he coughed out a big piece of bread.'

Though she spends a good deal of her time mentoring junior nurses, she always places patient care first.

She said: 'After I learned that many of the patients have no relatives or loved ones who visit them, I have been organising birthday parties each month since 2002 for the patients born in that month.'

'The parties are held in the first week of each month. I buy a small cake for the occasion and also buy small gifts like sweets and chocolates from my own pocket.'

She decided on a nursing career while serving in the Red Cross during her school days.

She said: 'It was my first job and 24 years later, I am still at it. When I was doing the night shifts, my husband helped look after our sons. He has been very supportive, and my sons have asked me to upgrade myself by attending the staff nurse course.'

'You need heart and passion for nursing, otherwise you will not last long.'