

COMMUNITY



The National University Health System is seeking a better understanding of the history of the Alexandra Hospital site amid a master-plan study to examine the longer-term use of the compound. ST PHOTO: JEREMY KWAN

MyTurf

Remembering Alexandra Hospital's rich heritage

My Turf is a fortnightly series that aims to share untold stories of our neighbourhoods. In this instalment, we take a look at Alexandra Hospital's heritage push in the lead-up to redevelopment of its compound.

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In 1971, nurse Tan Soh Hiang stepped into the British-built Alexandra Hospital and was greeted by an expansive building, but one caked with dust.

She changed out of her uniform into civilian clothes and, with an initial batch of 19 nurses and administrators, started scrubbing and cleaning the vacant building.

The former military hospital had been empty for a period before the British sold it to Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) for a token sum of \$1 on Sept 11 that year.

"We even cleaned the ceilings and had to take furnishings like beds and equipment out of storage and wipe them down," said Mrs Tan, now an 81-year-old retiree.

After three days of intense work, the main building, a ward and a reception area were ready for its official opening on Sept 15 that year.

Mrs Tan's memories of the place, as one of the few surviving nurses from Alexandra Hospital's pioneer batch, are being documented by a team from the hospital's fifth and permanent administrator – the National University Health System (NUHS).

It is part of NUHS' push to better understand the history of the site as more changes await the compound, which was opened in 1940.

NUHS also officially launched a heritage wall at the hospital late last

month – a project that started about five months ago before NUHS took over from Sengkang Hospital as the site's occupant in June.

The wall, which is sited along a public corridor at the main building, was designed to celebrate the hospital's 80th anniversary and to raise public awareness about its rich history.

MOH and NUHS are working on a master-plan study to examine the longer-term use of the Alexandra Hospital compound. This will mean, among other things, intensifying land usage.

The sprawling 12ha compound, the size of 8½ football fields, comprises lush greenery and 51 buildings – three of which were conserved in 2014.

The hospital was briefly closed for renovations in 2015 and reopened the same year.

Alexandra Hospital chief executive officer Jason Phua said that the hospital will conduct environment impact assessment studies and engage with residents, civic group My Community and consultants specialising in architectural conservation.

Associate Professor Phua said: "It is one of the oldest sites still serving as a hospital and we will want to maintain its healthcare heritage... At the same time, we want to examine ways to intensify its use to better serve the community."

He said NUHS is working closely with MOH and the National Heritage Board to examine "how best



(Clockwise from bottom left) Alexandra Hospital's chief executive Jason Phua, 46, with pioneer nurse Tan Soh Hiang and strategic communications staff Bianca Boh and Tan Ding Xiang, 26. Ms Boh and Mr Tan are part of a team documenting the hospital's heritage by, among other things, recording the oral accounts of former staff like Mrs Tan. PHOTO: GIN TAY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

to preserve the historical heritage of the Alexandra campus".

The hospital, which first opened with 356 beds, served as the main military hospital in the region for the British.

A few times a month, former staff and descendants of war veterans request tours of the compound. When they drop by, the Alexandra Hospital team takes the opportunity to record their oral history accounts.

Ms Bianca Boh, 24, an Alexandra Hospital strategic communications staff member working on the heritage project, said: "The whole exercise has been very meaningful. We want to honour the building's past."

My Community's founder Kwek Li Yong said the compound is also home to other historic structures, including the mess facing Alexandra Road where prisoners of war were held, ancillary buildings constructed as makeshift operating theatres, and tunnels which were designed to serve as air raid shelters and vaults for medical supplies.

In 1942, about 200 people were killed in a Japanese-led massacre of occupants of the hospital.

Mr Kwek said My Community hopes to conduct a heritage impact assessment of the compound.

He said the group is in touch with the British archives to look at the plans and layout of the hospital to identify structures that are not only

architecturally significant, but also historically and socially important.

He said the need for beds in an ageing society is an urgent one, but he hopes that the changes to the historic site will not be too abrupt.

"It was the site of the worst massacre in the British empire. The changes need to be respectful of the history of the place."

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MYTURF

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SERVING THE COMMUNITY

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JASON PHUA, chief executive officer of Alexandra Hospital, on the hospital.

MEANINGFUL WORK

The whole exercise has been very meaningful. We want to honour the building's past.



MS BIANCA BOH, an Alexandra Hospital strategic communications staff member, on the heritage project she is working on.

NEED TO RESPECT HISTORY

It was the site of the worst massacre in the British empire. The changes need to be respectful of the history of the place.



MR KWEK LI YONG, My Community's founder, who hopes the changes to the hospital compound will not be too abrupt.