

**Source:** The Straits Times, Page A2  
**Date:** 5 January 2022

## Covid-19 ‘virtual wards’ allow more patients to recover at home

**Cheryl Tan**

Some hospitals here have been setting up Covid-19 “virtual wards” so that those whose conditions are stable, but who are ineligible for the home recovery programme, will also be allowed to recover in the comfort of their homes.

These patients include those who are unvaccinated, those on immunosuppressive medication and patients with chronic medical conditions.

The National University Health System’s virtual ward has helped more than 500 Covid-19 patients so far, saving 3,500 bed days since September last year, said Dr Stephanie Ko, a consultant at the division of

advanced internal medicine, at the National University Hospital’s Department of Medicine.

The ward has also enrolled several Omicron cases, and it is ready to help with bed capacity if the Covid-19 surge hits, she told The Straits Times yesterday.

The treatment in the virtual ward is similar to that in a Covid-19 treatment facility or hospital – with doctors and nurses doing “ward rounds” daily or every other day through teleconsultation, and ensuring the patients measure their vital signs routinely, said Dr Ko.

The care team can also visit patients’ homes if required – such as to administer drip-based medication to help high-risk Covid-19 patients reduce their risk of developing severe pneumonia, or

to do blood tests.

“In the Covid-19 virtual ward, our nurses teach patients how to monitor their own temperature, oxygen levels and blood pressure.

“Patients with smartphones are enrolled for our vital signs chatbot, which reminds them to take these readings and submit them via an online form up to three times daily,” she added.

Around half of the patients were referred from one of the cluster’s three hospitals – National University Hospital, Alexandra Hospital or Ng Teng Fong General Hospital – after a period of hospital stay.

“The other half were referred to us directly from community providers such as National University Polyclinics or the case management task group at the Ministry of

Health, for patients who were at home and wished to continue recovery at home rather than go to a facility,” said Dr Ko.

Such patients are either 80 years old and above and fully vaccinated, or more than 50 years old and not fully vaccinated, or have chronic medical conditions or weakened immune systems, such as patients who are on chemotherapy or have had organ transplants.

Some patients dying from Covid-19, but who wished to do so at home, have also been supported through the programme, she noted.

Similarly, the Singapore General Hospital (SGH), which set up its Covid-19 virtual ward on Oct 8, has enrolled 120 patients so far, said Dr Michelle Tan, the consultant in charge of the ward, and the head

and consultant at the hospital’s Department of Family Medicine and Continuing Care.

Patients are monitored remotely with the help of a messaging bot known as Doctor Covid, with which they are required to report their vital signs such as oxygen saturation levels, pulse rate and temperature three times a day, said Dr Tan.

Some patients may be required to take their blood pressure as well, and the necessary equipment can be loaned to those who need it, she added.

Those who are not tech savvy will have nurses calling them regularly to check their vital signs and to ensure that they are doing well at home, Dr Tan said.

The bot, co-developed by SGH, SingHealth and the Agency for Sci-

ence, Technology and Research was initially used in migrant worker dormitories during the peak of the outbreak there in April 2020, and has been repurposed for the virtual ward, she noted.

Since rolling out the virtual ward, more than 800 bed days in the isolation ward have been saved, freeing up capacity for more patients, she added.

Noting that Singapore is bracing itself for a possible Omicron wave next month or in March, Dr Tan felt the virtual ward would play a “very relevant role” in such a scenario.

Currently, it has capacity for 100 patients at a time, though it has a surge capacity for up to 200 patients when needed, she added.

[tansuwen@sph.com.sg](mailto:tansuwen@sph.com.sg)