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2 Singaporean transplant patients win big at world games, thanks to gift of life from their husbands



Ms Jamie Yeow and Ms Galina Ivanova with the tennis medals they won at the World Transplant Games in April. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO



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SINGAPORE - A former triathlete and an avid tennis player, she mourned the loss of a physically active life when kidney failure set in.

But after her husband donated his kidney to her, Ms Jamie Yeow, 43, resolved to make full use of her new lease of life, and went on to win two medals in tennis at the World Transplant Games in April.

Her tennis partner, whom she paired up to play doubles with, also bagged two medals at the world's largest sporting event for organ or bone marrow recipients, which has some events also open to organ donors and their family members.

Ms Galina Ivanova, a 44-year-old housewife with four children aged between seven and 20, was on the brink of death before her liver transplant in May 2021.

She suffered from cirrhosis, where her liver was severely scarred. Doctors told her husband that she might have less than three months to live if she did not get a transplant.

Her Singaporean husband donated part of his liver to save her.

Originally from Russia, Ms Ivanova has been living in Singapore for the past 23 years and has since become a Singaporean.



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She said of her two silver medals in tennis singles and doubles: “I love Singapore a lot and it meant a big deal for me to represent Singapore.

“Everyone reminds me it’s an amazing achievement, given how sick I was.”

She was hospitalised for three months after her transplant due to complications. When she was discharged, she was just skin and bones, weighing only 40kg on her 1.68m-tall frame. Her muscles were so weak that she had to use a walking aid for three months.

It was only about a year after her transplant that she resumed playing tennis. Before long, she found herself competing in inter-club tennis tournaments.

She said: “I’m very grateful to my doctors at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) for the amazing way they took care of me and how they saved my life.”

A seven-strong Singapore team competed in six sports at the 2023 World Transplant Games held in Perth from April 15 to 21.

The amateur athletes, who paid for their own trip, returned with five medals in tennis and badminton, said leader of Team Singapore Yip Je Choong. Mr Yip, 54, who had a kidney transplant, competed in cycling.

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In Singapore, the Society of Transplantation (Singapore) and the SGH and National University Hospital transplant centres organise the Singapore Transplant Games once every two years. The next edition of the Games will be held in 2024, after a three-year hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Winners of the Singapore games are asked whether they would like to join the world games.

For Ms Yeow, she was diagnosed with IgA nephropathy – a disease that affects the kidneys' ability to filter waste and fluid from one's blood – in her teens, and her kidney function deteriorated over time.

By 2020, her kidneys had failed. She would get breathless from climbing a flight of stairs and felt weak all the time.

Her doctor said she had to either start dialysis or get a transplant. Her husband decided to donate one of his kidneys to her, and she had the transplant in February 2022.

Ms Yeow, a bank executive with an 11-year-old daughter, performed beyond her own expectations to win a bronze medal in the singles category and a silver in doubles in her age group.

She was not in tip-top condition because she had suffered a muscle strain in her ribs, and was also down with a bad flu shortly before the Games started.

For both women, it was the first time they competed in the World Transplant Games. They used to compete in tennis tournaments in school or clubs before they became seriously ill.

Ms Yeow had trained up to four days a week in the past year, giving her “110 per cent best” to prepare for the Games.

“It’s nice to win, but I have also gained a lot more than just the medals. I have made good friends with the other tennis players,” she said.



Mr Yue Keng Siang won a bronze medal in badminton at the World Transplant Games. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Mr Yue Keng Siang, 62, is another Singaporean who did well at the Games, bagging a bronze medal in badminton.

This was his seventh time participating in the World Transplant Games, and the retired physical education teacher has won a total of seven medals in sports like badminton and squash.

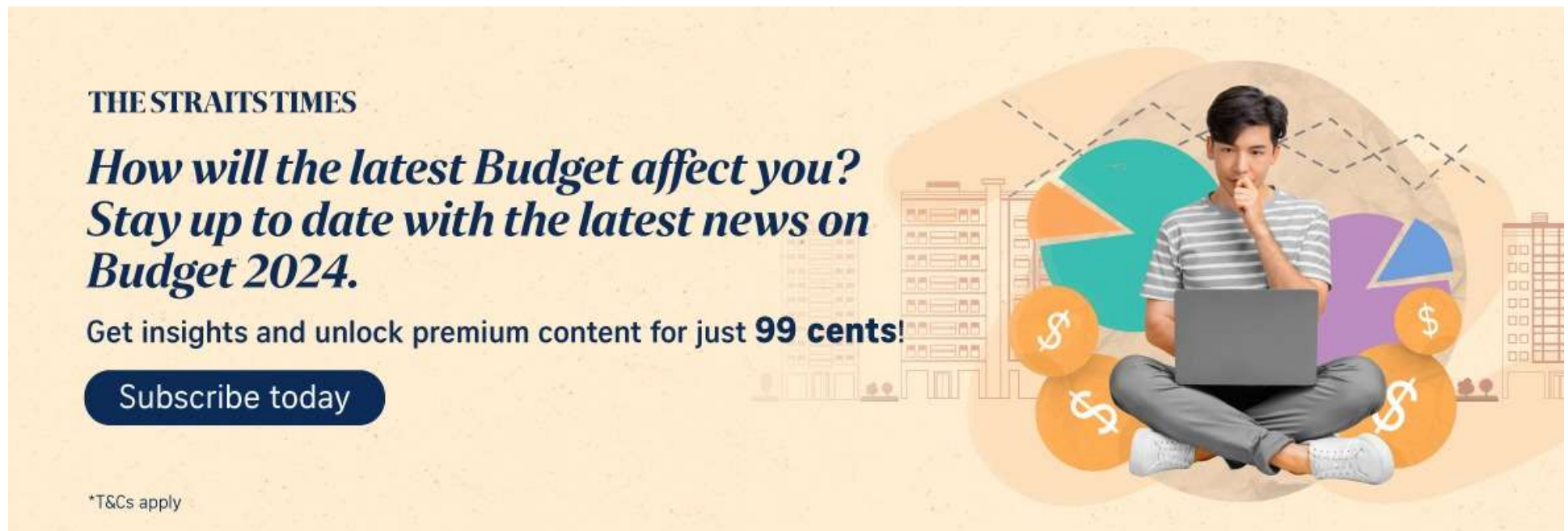
He had a liver transplant in 2008, with the organ coming from a dead donor, after he suffered a relapse of liver cancer.

Mr Yue said: “I compete to remind myself to keep fit and healthy. Win or lose, I want to enjoy participating in the Games and to make more friends.”

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