

Interview

Thailand: Covid-19 survivor tells story of recovery and social stigma

Friday 26 June 2020, by [MUANGMAITONG Wuttisak](#), [TANTIVITAYAPITAK Nutcha](#) (Date first published: 17 April 2020).

“Today, there are thousands of people who have been cured. No one dares to come out and give an interview and this is why. If you speak out, you drag your friends, your family and people close to you down with you. There are just people disgusted with you. They are against you,” said 39-year-old Wuttisak Muangmaitong, a boxing stadium receptionist and survivor of COVID-19.



Wuttisak Muangmaitong during his hospital stay

Wuttisak’s work requires him to take care of visitors, most of whom are foreigners who come to see boxing matches. Splitting his time between the Lumpinee and Rajadamnern Boxing stadiums, Wuttisak came into contact with foreign visitors every day.

By the end of January, Wuttisak started to become concerned about the spread of the “Wuhan virus,” which later came to be known as COVID-19, since he felt that he was among a high-risk group as he is constantly interacting with the stadiums’ international visitors. He was among the few employees who wore a face mask to work, something for which his co-workers teased him.

“Back then, we hadn’t closed the country. People came from all over the world. Americans, Europeans, Japanese, Chinese, they all came. I watched the news and thought we are definitely getting it, because the country was so wide open. The protocols at first weren’t very secure. They were only measuring people’s temperatures at airports. Some people who didn’t have a fever but may have had the virus could come in. We were only targeting returning Thai people who have to go into quarantine, but we let the tourists go without putting them in quarantine,” he said.

Wuttisak started showing symptoms around 11 March. His muscles ached, and he had a fever that went away once he took some paracetamol. He took the next day off. On 14 March, despite feeling better, Wuttisak decided to go to the nearby Siriraj Hospital to get tested for the virus.

When he first went to the hospital’s Piyamaharajkarun building, he found that the cost for COVID-19 testing was around 10,000 baht, so he opted for testing at the hospital’s COVID-19 department under the Gold Card universal health insurance scheme. Because he showed symptoms, and the doctor decided that he qualified as being at risk, his test was free of charge.

After waiting for 8 hours, and despite barely showing any symptoms at the time, his test came back positive.

“I felt lost,” Wuttisak said, “but I thought there was a chance that I contracted it, and I’d done some research. I knew it’s not scary. I didn’t have any pre-existing condition, so I should be alright, but I was a little bit worried. At that time, there were less than a hundred patients. At first, when I had to stay in a single room, it was very difficult. I was thinking a lot of things and worrying about everything, even though I was okay, but it could be a side effect of the antiviral drug. It gives you diarrhoea, anxiety, nausea, and breathing difficulty. When I was alone, there was a moment too when I wondered if I was going to die. When I moved to a shared room, we started sharing our experiences. Everyone has been through that point. Maybe it’s because we were the first cases, so it’s like they are testing the drug. It could be a strong drug, and then they keep adjusting it after.”

Wuttisak observes that COVID-19 is a disease without clear indicative symptoms. Some patients present with a fever and muscle pain, some with coughing and a sore throat, some with headaches, while others show almost no symptoms. From his conversations with other patients, he found that everyone experienced a loss of taste and smell. For some people, this lasted for a week, while for others, the symptom persisted even after they’ve recovered from the disease. He also said that 90% of the patients who were being treated at the same time as him were not severely ill, unless they had pre-existing conditions or were elderly.

Wuttisak was admitted to Siriraj Hospital for 10 days. He was then sent to Golden Jubilee Medical Centre at Mahidol University after testing found a reduced amount of the virus in his sample. He stayed there for 28 days, until he no longer tested positive for the virus and was no longer contagious.

Throughout that 28-day period, Wuttisak said he only paid 240 baht to Siriraj Hospital. Everything else was free of charge.

Wuttisak said that one of his friends who lives in the US told him that people have to wait several days before they can get tested, and afterwards, they have to wait 5 days for the result. If they test positive, the hospital will tell them to stay at home, and only severe cases will be admitted to hospital.

According to an announcement from the Thai Ministry of Public Health, all hospitals must accept COVID-19 patients for treatment until they recover to the best of the hospital’s abilities, and if the patient is to be referred to another hospital, the referral must be done appropriately and without charging the patient for their treatment or referral.

Wuttisak posted on his personal Facebook profile that he has contracted COVID-19 and asked people who came into contact with him to monitor themselves for symptoms and, if possible, to go into self-quarantine. As a result, he and those around him were subjected to social prejudice against those who contracted the disease during the current pandemic.

“I have to go and apologize to everyone,” Wuttisak said. “It happened to my father, my partner, my friends. My father lives in another province, and we haven’t seen each other for several weeks. I haven’t seen him since before I got sick, and there is definitely no chance that he could contract the virus from me, but what is unbelievable is that the District Officer went to see my father. In the end, he was quarantined in his house and was not allowed to go anywhere for three days, and he has to get tested. He has to get a throat and nose swab, which is painful. My partner was ordered by people at work to get tested as a confirmation. One of the friends I play football with was evicted from his condo. There’s a restaurant near my house that I went to a long time ago and posted about on Facebook. Some people dug up the post and said that I’ve just went there, so people didn’t want

to go there anymore and they have had to close down.

“Is this how we are going to live in Thai society? No one dares to speak out because this is what happens to them. Today, there are thousands of people who have been cured. No one dares to come out and give an interview and this is why. If you speak out, you drag your friends, your family and people close to you down with you. There are just people disgusted with you. They are against you, but I want to give people the correct information. Prevention is important, but it shouldn't be like this. Don't forget that a disease like this will be with us forever. Like other flus, everyone has the chance of getting it, and it's not as bad as SARS or MERS. With MERS, you have a 30%-40% chance of dying. With SARS, you have 10%, but for COVID-19, it's above 1%, which is very low, lower than cancer or heart disease.”

Wuttisak also said that there are people who have been treated for COVID-19 and were cured, and before they leave the hospital and go home, public health officials will go to their house to check the condition of their residence and inform people in the community. Wuttisak said that he knows of two cases of someone who was being treated at the same time as himself who were blocked from returning to their apartment by people who live in the same building and had to go and stay with their family.

“It's not like they refused to quarantine. Those cases deserved to be criticized. But here the doctors said they can go home, and they even have a medical certificate. They should be able to go home. Some people live alone and don't interact with people, so the hospitals try to send them home to make space in the hospital for the new cases that come in, but the society doesn't listen. If you don't believe the doctors, if you don't believe the officials, how are we going to live?”

“None of the people who got sick want to spread the virus because we know it's a waste of time. The symptoms might not be bad, but it's a long time before your body can rebuild its immune system. It takes at least 14 days, and you have to stay in quarantine for another 28 days to be sure.”

At the same time, there is the scientific theory of “herd immunity” which is a theory that when more people are cured of the disease, people in society who are not immune will automatically be protected, and that future outbreaks will be less likely. According to this theory, at least 60% of the population has to have contracted the disease to create herd immunity.

The media is also part of the problem. Wuttisak said that an unnamed mainstream media outlet took his Facebook post and used it in their report without asking for his permission.

“They didn't censor my name or my face, didn't ask for permission, and most importantly, what they said didn't match what I wrote. I wrote about prevention, but they reported it as a case from the boxing stadiums, and they said that everyone who contracted the virus from the boxing stadiums were severe cases, even though my symptoms weren't bad. As a result, people were calling me, asking why I said I was fine when the news said that I had a bad case of the disease. It's made me lose faith in this channel. How much media ethics is there? How ethical are they with their sources?”

Wuttisak said that the media like to report that the boxing stadiums are the main virus spreading grounds, so the so-called boxing gurus who were at the stadiums were stigmatized by the society, even though many cases also came from nightlife establishments. Wuttisak said that the group of patients who came in at the same time as him got the virus from the boxing stadiums, but after that, it was people who work in pubs and bars, of which they were also many.

Meanwhile, some theorized that the virus found at the boxing stadiums came from Italy, and that one of the 'gurus' caught the virus from a family member who recently returned from Italy, but

Wuttisak disagreed. He thinks that the virus might not have come from one person, as it was very widespread, and he also caught the virus even though he is a receptionist and stayed only on the ground floor, and did not go into the stadium itself, so he thinks that the virus may have been spread by many people, and may have come from foreign tourists who did not go through any screening measure other than having their temperature taken.

Yong Poovorawan, Head of the Centre of Excellence in Clinical Virology at the Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, posted on his Facebook page on 12 April:

“The new coronavirus, which started spreading in Thailand in January, is the strain that came from China. It is the Wuhan strain, the L (leucine) type. Later, many outbreaks took place in March in boxing stadiums and places of entertainment in Thonglo, and these were found that to be the same strain, the S (serine) type, which is not different. Saying that the boxing stadium strain is worse than the Thonglo strain is therefore not true. The boxing stadium strain and the Thonglo strain did not come from Italy. The Italy strain is also found in Thailand, in people who came back from Italy. It is the L (leucine) type. The outbreak in Bangkok in March up to today is more the S (serine) type than the L (leucine) type. The virus which was found spreading in Bangkok has similar characteristics, so we can’t conclude that the boxing stadium strain is worse than the strain found in places of entertainment. The severity probably depends on the patient. The boxing stadium group may have been more at risk, older, and with more underlying conditions than the Thonglo group..”

Wuttisak said “these day, some people like to just consume dramatic news, like how many people died today and how many people are in critical condition, but they might not be open to other information, such as that people who are cured of the disease cannot spread the virus, or that the symptoms may be mild and there is a high chance of recovery. But they are afraid until they become hateful towards other people, even though if we use proper protection, keep a distance, wear a mask, wash our hands often, this will help to greatly reduce the risk.”

Interview by Nutcha Tantivitayapitak

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