

She celebrates Hari Raya, thanks to liver transplant and altruistic donor

14-year-old who was diagnosed with rare chronic disease at six gets a new lease of life

Gracia Yap

Temasek Secondary School student Falisha Zafilin was just six when she was diagnosed with a rare chronic liver disease, but with a liver transplant and blood transfusions in 2022, she could celebrate another Hari Raya Aidilfitri on April 10.

Falisha, now 14, enjoys reading and writing as well as acting. She is a member of her school's drama-curricular activity group, known as Serious Play. "I will be acting as a zombie in an upcoming show," she told The Straits Times.

However, she could not always be so involved in school activities due to her health.

Before Falisha turned two, her mother, Madam Siti Zubaidah Mohamed Sharif, 45, noticed blood in the girl's faeces. The toddler was diagnosed with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

In 2015, Falisha was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC) at KKH after she underwent a liver biopsy when her IBD

medication did not work, and she repeatedly failed her liver function tests. She was referred to the National University Hospital (NUH) in 2018 for a second opinion after another liver biopsy indicated that her condition had worsened.

Dr Lee Ser Yee, senior consultant hepatopancreatobiliary surgeon at colorectal and liver clinic Surgical Associates, said PSC is a very rare chronic liver disease of unknown cause characterised by ongoing inflammation, destruction and scarring of the bile ducts.

"Patients may have abdominal pain, itchy skin, diarrhoea, jaundice, fatigue and fever due to blockage, infection and inflammation of the bile ducts," said Dr Lee.

"Treatment consists mainly of treating the symptoms and/or complications, or end-stage liver damage with a liver transplantation."

Adapting to IBD and PSC was not easy for Falisha, especially when she had to attend school. "I felt tired and I had hair loss," she said. "I missed a lot of school and my friends asked me why I skipped school."



Falisha Zafilin enjoys reading and writing, as well as acting and script-writing. "I wish to pursue drama and use drama to help others," she said. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

Her father, Mr Zafilin Abdul Hamid, 48, said: "We had to keep checking if the activities in school would affect her condition."

In 2021, during Falisha's PSLE year, she had severe jaundice. After a third liver biopsy, doctors said her liver could last for only another year.

After her transfer to NUH in April 2022, she underwent tests from

June to see if she was a viable candidate for a transplant.

In July, she had a cancer scare, which, if confirmed, would have ruled out a transplant. A lung biopsy later cleared her of cancer. She was back on the transplant list but still needed a donor.

Her parents, who are educators, could not donate their livers because of incompatible blood types.

"We felt lousy because we could not help," said Mr Zafilin.

In September, her family was informed that an altruistic donor had stepped forward.

Falisha had a liver transplant in October, and needed platelet transfusions due to a post-surgery complication.

Falisha's primary doctor, Dr S. Venkatesh Karthik, a senior consultant at the National University Centre for Organ Transplantation (Nucot) at NUH, told ST that the NUH team was "glad to see Falisha undergo successful liver transplantation".

He added: "We continue to monitor her progress post-liver transplantation closely. It has been a gratifying experience to witness Falisha's journey towards recovery and a new lease of life."

Mr Zafilin said: "We wanted to meet (the donor) or at least do something to show our appreciation, but we were not allowed to."

He said Falisha and the donor exchanged letters and gifts, facilitated by Nucot, without meeting.

Last Hari Raya was the first that Falisha did not spend in the hospital since she became sick, said Madam Zubaidah. However, the family kept visiting to a minimum as it was just six months after her transplant.

"We were mindful that Falisha should not be in a crowded area or exert herself physically and are doing the same this year as she has had episodes of being unwell," she added.

With her new lease of life and an interest in drama and script-writing, Falisha now wants to chase that dream. "I wish to pursue drama and use drama to help others," she said.

Thanking the donor for the generous act, Madam Zubaidah said the donor is "an angel and we are really blessed". She added that the family also realised how important blood donations were to Falisha's transplant.

Hoping that more people will donate blood, Falisha said: "I feel so touched. I don't even know who donated blood to me and I think it is so selfless."

A spokeswoman for the Singapore Red Cross (SRC) said only 1.87 per cent of Singapore's residential population are blood donors currently, and 39 per cent of them donate more than twice a year. A total of 122,668 units of whole blood were collected in 2023, with each unit containing 350ml to 450ml.

In June 2023, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung appealed to those with O+ and O- blood types to give blood and raise the national blood stocks, as he launched a new award to encourage more youth to become regular donors.

SRC's spokeswoman said: "We hope Singapore youth will step forward to donate. They are the next generation of blood donors, and their commitment is key to future-proofing our blood stocks."

The public can visit giveblood.sg for more information.

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