Inspiring dads: Single father cooked and cared for son with blood cancer

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Muhammad Irfan Mohamed Awi (right) became closer to his son Muhammad Danish Muhammad Irfan after caring for him when he had cancer. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

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Published Jun 20, 2026, 09:20 AM
Updated Jun 22, 2026, 01:16 PM

Summarise

SINGAPORE – The hospital became a second home for Muhammad Irfan Mohamed Awi, 53, after his son was diagnosed with lymphoma, a type of blood cancer.

What started out as a prolonged cough for Muhammad Danish Muhammad Irfan turned into an emergency in October 2021.

Danish, then 16, became breathless and had to be admitted to the intensive care unit at National University Hospital (NUH).

For about 48 hours, Irfan could not see his son until medical experts were sure the latter did not have Covid-19. The single father of three, who has been divorced since 2014, says he broke down when he was told of his son's diagnosis.

Lymphoma is a type of blood cancer that begins in the lymphatic system, affecting infection-fighting white blood cells.

It is uncommon among children below 18 years old with five new cases a year in Singapore, says Allen Yeoh, head of division and a senior consultant from the division of paediatric haematology and oncology in the Department of Paediatrics at the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute within NUH.

Coincidentally, Irfan had left his 15-year job in the civil service in May that year. He had spent the previous months getting a private-hire vehicle licence, taking courses in mobile phone photography and videography, and dabbling in home-based catering.

"It was supposed to be a six-month thing to take a break, but God had better plans," says Irfan, who also has two daughters aged 22 and 24, and has full custody and care of them.

As the only designated visitor because of social distancing restrictions then, Irfan's days revolved around his son's needs for about two months. He slept in the sofa bed for caregivers in his son's room once he was moved to the general ward.

When Danish tired of hospital food, Irfan put his cooking skills to good use. Danish was instructed to eat only freshly made, fully cooked food because of his weakened immune system from

lymphoma and cancer treatment. Foodcourt takeaways were not an option because of the risk of contamination.

Every day, Irfan would head back to his three-room flat in Bukit Batok to do the laundry, clean the home and prepare Danish's lunch.

The pair would spend a few hours together before Irfan rushed home to prepare a homemade dinner, usually rice, vegetables and chicken. In between all this, there were countless medical consent forms to sign.

"I told him: 'You are not going through this alone'," says Irfan.

Danish, now 21, says it took a while for his diagnosis to sink in while going through multiple medical procedures. Throughout his ordeal, "it was comforting to see someone familiar because the room is secluded and it can feel quite lonely", he recalls.

He adds: "He's beside me, I'm trying to sleep, and he's snoring very loudly."

Staff at National University Hospital celebrated Danish's 17th birthday with him while he was

hospitalised for blood cancer. PHOTO: MUHAMMAD IRFAN MOHAMED AWI

As his 17th birthday approached that December, Danish yearned to return home, but every time he was cleared for release, he would come down with fever.

The ward staff surprised him with a birthday cake and a visit from his second sister two weeks before his birthday.

On his birthday weekend, Irfan and his daughters were disinfecting and cleaning their home to receive Danish when he got a desperate text. Danish had come down with fever yet again.

“I want to go back. I cannot tahan any more,” Danish wrote, using the Malay word for “endure”.

Irfan rushed to the hospital and managed to get the green light for his son to return home – just for two days.

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While the medical team led by Yeoh managed Danish’s health, the then first-year information technology student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic put his studies on hold for about 1½ years.

Around March 2022, he started chemotherapy, which involved six cycles of hospital stays of at least two weeks, every three weeks.

But instead of improving, Danish relapsed in June. The Children’s Cancer Foundation helped to fund his CAR T-cell therapy, an experimental immunotherapy where a patient’s cells are genetically engineered to fight cancer cells.

Yeoh says his team had to seek permission from the hospital's ethics board as the therapy is usually carried out only in adults and has a success rate of 30 per cent in adults with relapsed lymphoma.

His doctors monitored him closely as Danish responded to the therapy, with mild side effects.

Irfan (centre) with Danish and Allen Yeoh, head of division and a senior consultant from the division of paediatric haematology and oncology in the Department of Paediatrics at the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute within NUH. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

The procedure, done in October 2022, made such a difference that Danish was able to return to school about six months later. He still visits the hospital monthly for infusions that help treat his immunodeficiency, a side effect of the CAR T-cell therapy.

To Irfan's surprise, Danish graduated in 2025, half a year earlier than expected.

Driven by a desire to catch up, he took on extra modules and did well enough to receive offers in computing courses from four local

universities. Danish will join Singapore Management University in August.

He says of his father: “He loves me very much. He came to the hospital every day, which in itself is quite challenging, and he had to think about the family and finances.

“I know sometimes he doesn’t share the difficulties he goes through. He says he’s emotional, but I think he’s very, very strong.”

Irfan says what kept him going through the darkest moments were his Muslim faith, family and close friends. He returned to work in another civil service role in 2025 after three years of caregiving.

“It was not easy. I cried when he was sleeping in the ward so he wouldn’t know. I kept telling myself that there is somebody out there who is worse off than me,” he says. “To all fathers out there who are having challenges, it is important to have a support system. You cannot do it alone.”

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Stephanie Yeo is senior correspondent at The Straits Times’ Life section.

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