SUNSCREEN IN A PILL?
British researchers hope to copy chemicals naturally found in coral that block the sun's rays to create sunscreen pills for humans.

Eight Straits Times photojournalists showcase 22 people who have chosen what they will wear to the grave.

Despite current economic worries, Singapore may well look back on 2011 as the year it made huge strides to attract vast sums of footloose capital from around the globe, reports Andy Mukherjee.

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GOING MY WAY

THE stigma of death is a powerful one but that just helped to spur eight Straits Times photographers and the Lien Foundation to tackle the daunting subject.

Wang Hui Fen, Lim Wee Liang, Meghlan Rajasegaran, Desmond Lim, Neo Xiaobin, Samuel He, Kevin Lim and Nuria Ling embarked on a project to photograph people from all walks of life in the outfit they would want to wear at their own funeral.

They approached about 50 people. Some were surprisingly open-minded, but many declined to be photographed in their last outfit, saying it was too morbid.

A few were enthusiastic at first but pulled out because of family objections.

In the end, about half of those approached agreed to be photographed.

This project, a collaboration between the non-profit Lien Foundation and The Straits Times Picture Desk, seeks to provoke people to get thinking about death.

The objective is to remove the taboo of talking about death, encourage reflection and preparation in end-of-life matters, and provide a light-hearted yet serious look into this topic.

Lien Foundation chief executive Lew Poh Wah said: "Dressing is a way of life, and even at death, our clothes can be a statement of who we are."

"Each outfit is one that best expresses the subject’s unique life. Their outfits and candid attitude have given us a fresh and fun perspective on how to deal with death."

If there’s something like funeral fashion, they are setting a trend by wearing their souls on their sleeves."

By DESMOND LIM

CANCER patient Foo Piao Lin, 46, was more badly off than I expected when I first met her. Her face was abnormally bloated and she was completely bald.

Yet she had bravely volunteered to be photographed for a project because the sofa-take-stay was a concept she could relate to.

On July 15, the day of the shoot, the mood in her flat in Choa Chu Kang was sombre. Around 30 family members gathered in the living room in quiet support.

Some stroked around Madam Foo, a former bank teller and mother of three, helping her to put on her choice of last outfit – a $500 pearl-coloured cheongsam she wore for the photo shoot. The session lasted only about 10 minutes and I managed only eight frames.

When I offered to take a family portrait, they failed. Madam Fang Bin Fang, 46, a driver, propped her up, two of her younger sisters helped her don the dress, while a family member scurried to prepare a small mirror. Later, one of the sisters held up two pairs of shoes for her to choose from.

Madam Foo, who had cancer of the breast, lungs and brain, had battled the disease for about 11 years. She struggled to keep her eyes open, breathing shallowly as she collaborated on with the photo shoot. The session lasted only about 10 minutes and I managed only eight frames.

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At her funeral, simple rites were performed and loved ones paid their respects. There was weeping but no loud outpouring of grief.

"We really do not know what else we can do to help her," she said. I did not know what to say, so I placed my hand on hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I think my wife was very brave, much braver than I am. Even when she was dying, she was always smiling," said Mr Chin in Mandarin.

"She did not expect her condition to be so terminal and lived the last week of her life very well. She always was a fighter."

"I’m not superstitious. My wife was so optimistic and open-minded even near the end of her life."

"If she was willing to be photographed in her last outfit, how could we say no?"

ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

When a photo shoot mirrored reality
MARLA BENDINI, 24, transgender visual and performance artist

Lust outfit: Sequinned dress and disco balls.

“We exhibit different facets of ourselves to family, friends and society, and some lead a lifetime of fragmented self. The opportunity to unite and present all my love for life like a disco ball would be a nice way to go. The party never ends!”

KOH GON ENG (girl), 33, and LIM CHIN SUIH, 65. The married couple run a Emperor's costume for Mr Lam and traditional Chinese costume for Madam Koh. The outfits are part of their stage personas, the Emperor and Feng Jie.

“These are the most elaborate costumes we have for our performances. And when we die, we want to be remembered as performers.”

BURN KENNY KOH, 31, musician

Lust outfit: A pair of black jeans with white skull prints, and I'll go topless to show off my tattoos.

“I bought this pair of jeans in Los Angeles in May for US$250 (S$300). You can't get this in Singapore. The label Forgotten Saints is well-liked by rock musicians. If this looks good enough for my rock star heroes, it's good enough for me. I am not going to bring my eight-year-old bull terrier Bully along. She just wanted to be in the picture.”
ST PHOTO: LIM WUI LIANG
CLAUDIO SOARES DE MORAIS, 29, capoeira instructor
Last outfit: White capoeira outfit
“I love white because it’s a peaceful colour and I’m very attached to my capoeira uniform, which is also white. I’ve already told my family that I want to be buried in these clothes and in a white coffin.” Capoeira is a dance form.

ST PHOTO: WANG HUI FEN
LOW MUI LANG, 52, executive director of the Salvation Army Nursing Home
Last outfit: Salvation Army uniform
“This uniform expresses who I am and why I am doing what I am doing. When Jesus sees me in my uniform, I hope to hear him say, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant.’”

ST PHOTO: LIM WUI LIANG
ALICE TAY, 30, producer at an advertising agency
Last outfit: In her favourite colours (red and pink), hat and camera
“I don’t know what the afterlife has in store. It’s a journey of uncertainty ahead and the best I can do is to make sure I am in my most comfortable clothes, clothes that best define me in style and colour. Of course, with my camera too.”

HE PEI ZHEN, 24, art student
Last outfit: Covered with sand from all over the world and combat boots
“Before I die, I’d like to have travelled the globe. With sand from all over the world, armed with sturdy fists and a pair of combat boots to fight the evils of afterlife, I think I’d be well prepared for the journey.” Sand is the symbol of an eternity; and when all has been said and done, and my time has come, I’d want to die at peace and in my own clothes.

ST PHOTO: NURIA LING
ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM
JACK SIM, 54, founder of the World Toilet Organisation
Last outfit: Suit and a toilet seat around the neck
“Time is short and every moment must be used wisely, so I want my last moment to be useful also. I have invested a large part of my life in sanitation issues, so this will be my last attempt to advocate good sanitation.”

ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN
LEE WEI KIT, 27, marketing communications executive at Tan Tock Seng Hospital
Last outfit: Favourite T-shirt, bermudas and slippers
“I choose to be in my favourite T-shirt, bermudas and slippers because I am Singaporean. I must embrace the unofficial uniform of Singaporeans... Also, if I’m going, I want to go in something that I’m comfortable in. In awe, comfort is the most important thing.”

ST PHOTO: LIM WUI LIANG
KENNY PNG, 32, director
Last outfit: Favourite leather jacket and guitar
“Should I stay? Or should I go? It’s the dilemma that folks like me – who always have something new to look forward to in life – face. Of course, we may not get to choose when the time comes, so we might as well have the readiness up to the good old passions dressed out like a rock punk just to shock the ‘Man.’”

VISHYABENDAN VYSALINGAM, 46, oil and gas engineer consultant at a law firm
Last outfit: Favourite Liverpool T-shirt
“I like the design and it has information on the origins of Liverpool FC. Plus, it is comfortable to wear. I bought it after I travelled to Anfield, the home of Liverpool FC, which is one of the places where I hope my ashes will be scattered.”
EMMA GOH, 29, community relations manager and avid traveller

Last outfit: Favourite blouse and Peranakan-inspired skirt

"Some like to wear traditional clothes for weddings, why not do it for funerals also? It’s simple, comfortable and has a touch of my Peranakan heritage. When I die, I want to be expedited and have my ashes thrown into the sea so that I can continue travelling."

ALSON TAN, 26, communications graduate

Last outfit: Favourite clubbing T-shirt which has the words “In case of emergency, BREAK DANCE” printed on it, and jeans

"I’m known as a Mambo freak by my friends so I’d like to think I’ll be doing something I like to do. I’m a fun-loving person, thus I identify with the shirt because it’s hilarious!"

MARCUS TAN, 40, quality manager and a member of Caring Clown Singapore

Last outfit: A tailor-made costume that turns him into “Marco the Clown”

"The fire design on the collar reminds me of the fire that keeps me going in entertaining patients and children. It is an extension of myself. I want to go in a happy, joyful way. Maybe if I go to heaven, I can cheer the people up there. Or if I go to hell, I can do the same."

YIEN TAT VEE, 81, I'll cremated. An American by nationality but born in Hong Kong, he married a Singaporean and has been based here in this place. Last outfit: Sarong kebaya

"I am a Peranakan. I used to sew sarong kebayas for my mother on every birthday and for myself too. My last sewing today is sponsored by St Joseph’s Home. I choose cotton because it’s comfortable. I like the embroidery a lot. To me, death will come whenever the Lord calls me home."

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MICHAEL HO, 28, civil servant and regular diver

Last outfit: Wetsuit

"Having been walking on land all this while, I have learnt to appreciate the life under water much more. It’s peaceful, quiet and unpretentious. It is a place I want to live in, if I could, forever."

SHANNEN KHAH, 31, model

Last outfit: Mermaid costume

"I want to be free-spirited and graceful like a mermaid. I’ll choose to be cremated and have my ashes scattered in the sea. I want to be remembered as a mermaid and to be able to swim in the sea and live for a thousand years without ageing."