

Private vaccinations must not come at cost of public jabs, says think tank

By **Jason Thomas** - March 3, 2021 11:30 AM

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Azrul Mohd Khalib says allowing private hospitals to buy and administer Covid-19 vaccines will speed up the national immunisation programme but should not be done at the expense of the people.

PETALING JAYA: The head of a local think tank has stressed that any plans to allow private hospitals to purchase their own supplies of Covid-19 vaccines and administer them must not come at the cost of the government’s National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme.

Azrul Mohd Khalib, chief executive of the Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy, said allowing private hospitals to procure and administer vaccines would enable people to receive their shots earlier than the February 2022 deadline and remove them from the public vaccination queue at no cost to the public purse or supply of vaccines.

“It will also increase the existing coverage of the government’s vaccination programme and ensure that those doses go to those most in need,” he told FMT.

“A private option for the Covid-19 vaccines should be made available as soon as possible. However, it should never be at the expense of, or in competition with, the public programme. Instead, it must complement the programme. It cannot be taking away from the public supply to give to the private sector to then sell.”

Science, technology, and innovation minister Khairy Jamaluddin previously told health news portal CodeBlue that while there were no immediate provisions for private hospitals to buy and run their own vaccination programmes, it was a proposal the government would consider “later”.

In a statement yesterday, the Association of Private Hospitals Malaysia (APHM) hoped to see private hospitals given the opportunity to procure vaccines from different sources once approvals are granted by the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency.

Stating that the February completion date is “extremely long and unacceptable”, APHM said private hospitals could be mobilised “very fast” to complement the government’s efforts in ensuring the majority of the population is vaccinated in the shortest possible time to assist in achieving herd immunity.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Subramaniam Muniandy agreed with the proposal and called on the government to look into the idea as he said the speed that the vaccinations are rolled out is of “utmost importance”.

Stating that the private sector, especially general practitioners and private specialists clinics, is ready to play a significant role as they believe they will be able to help inoculate the population faster, Subramaniam estimated that 270,000 people a day would be vaccinated if 9,000 participating facilities were able to vaccinate 30 people a day.

He noted that vaccinations at private healthcare facilities will allow those who can afford it to pay without burdening the government’s budget, stating it would be especially useful for those who may need to travel, those planning to study abroad and companies who may want to pay for their staff involved in the service sectors that deal with people.

“It will also allow the government to concentrate on the larger group to be vaccinated,” he said in a statement.

“The private sector is ready to pool procurements (for vaccines) with some state governments that are also keen to do so.

“The main objective is to reach as many (people) as fast as possible so that the country’s economy can recover faster.”

Among those offering a differing view was Dr Khor Swee Kheng, a health systems and policies specialist, who warned that opening up a private market for vaccines will increase inequality.

“Every dose for a rich person is one less dose for a frontline doctor or nurse,” he said in a tweet.

“This is both unfair and dangerous to the doctor, the nurse and Malaysia’s health system.”

Khor also said the “speed to achieve herd immunity” is not dependent on the number of vaccinators or public and private partnerships. Instead, it is highly dependent on vaccine supply and public confidence in the vaccine.

While he said he is pro-private market for vaccines, “but not right now”, Khor proposed two conditions for when it is safe to start a private market.

Apart from ensuring three or more vaccines are approved by the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA), he wanted to see Malaysia successfully complete its Phase 1 and 2 vaccinations – for frontliners and high-risk groups – before allowing private facilities to start vaccinating the general public.

“Waiting until after August will ensure that we give the first doses to the vulnerable and ensure there’s enough vaccine competition to have low prices when private hospitals are finally allowed to sell,” he said.

“There’s no rush to open a private market now. Let’s help strengthen the government vaccination programme first. Malaysia’s vulnerable groups depend on it.”

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