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'Don't rush to relax SOP'

Easing of curbs should be slow and careful, say health experts

PUTRAJAYA: The nationwide lockdown may have resulted in a slight decline in the number of Covid-19 cases, but the government should not rush into relaxing the standard operating procedures (SOP), say health experts.

Malaysian Public Health Physicians Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said while the result of the lockdown had been encouraging, any decision to loosen restrictions must be made cautiously.

"Let's not rush to allow more activities. It has to be done slowly instead, such as allowing longer operating hours for takeaways at restaurants instead of allowing *pasar malam* (night markets) or schools to reopen."

"We don't want a scenario where allowing more sectors or activities to open will result in an increase in the number of Covid-19 cases and the prospect of another lockdown," he said when contacted.

The lockdown was enforced for 14 days from June 1 and the government has announced a two-week extension until June 28.

Dr Zainal Ariffin said the lockdown had achieved its aim, but pointed out that there was "still a long way to go to bring the numbers down".

"The government should also ensure that Covid-19 screenings be capped at 100,000 to 120,000 daily so that any changes to the number of positive cases are actual," he said.

According to the World Health Organisation standard, between 10 and 30 tests are to be done for each



positive case.

Universiti Malaya professor of occupational and public health Dr Victor Hoe said there were many factors which the government must consider before making a decision to relax the SOP such as the transmission rate, R-naught levels, test positivity rate and number of cases.

He noted that present Covid-19 variants in Malaysia were very infectious.

"After taking all these factors into consideration, the government should not rush into relaxing the SOP, especially the one involving the removal of face masks in indoor areas," he said.

Prof Hoe said that current Covid-19 developments around the globe pointed to a rise of the Delta variant, which is a more infectious strain of the virus.

"The situation is basically very fluid. Unless the government knows that cases have gone down, where contact tracing is possible and the isolation of positive patients can be done more effectively, then the relaxation of SOP should not be taken so lightly," he said.

Meanwhile, to address the recent surge in Covid-19 cases in Labuan, health experts said present lock-

down, restrictions must continue and the authorities should adopt a "find, test, trace, isolate and support strategy".

Prof Dr Moy Fong Ming from Universiti Malaya's Social and Preventive Medicine Department said the Delta variant was more infectious and the authorities should test all individuals who were close contacts.

She suggested using the RTK-Ag test, which is cheaper and faster in providing results compared to the RT-PCR test.

"Isolate and treat all the positive cases. Then, we will not have asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic patients moving around the community and infecting others unintentionally."

"Vaccination should also be given as soon as supplies are available," she added.

Public health specialist Asst Prof Dr Mohammad Farhan Rusli from International Islamic University Malaysia also gave similar suggestions, pointing out that the recent surge in Labuan reflected the geographical dynamics of the island.

He said the best way to address the Covid-19 surge was to maintain the lockdown in Labuan.

"Shut all services, rope in the army for enforcement and conduct complete contact tracing."

"The borders of the island must also be controlled to prevent any breaches, while mass testing must be done to ensure that all positive cases are detected early," said Farhan, who is part of the Selangor Covid-19 Task Force committee.

When asked to comment on the commencement of Phase Four of the national immunisation programme, Prof Moy said supplies must be adequate so that vaccination for the vulnerable community would not be affected.

"We need to protect these high-risk groups so that they don't get infected and suffer serious symptoms," she said.

She noted that data provided by the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry showed that less than 11% of the Covid-19 vaccines ordered had been delivered so far.

"If vaccine supplies are slow, priority should be given to the high-risk groups for the above reasons," Prof Moy added.

Prof Farhan concurred, saying that the focus of manpower must be placed on vaccinating the vulnerable before Phase Four commenced.

"Only after these people have been vaccinated can we roll out the different mechanisms and plans, be it economic frontliners or whoever it is."

"Protect the most vulnerable as people in this group are among the many filling our ICU wards and hospitals," he said.

On June 9, Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin told a press conference that Malaysia would receive 3,641,040 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on June 10, which equalled 8% of the nation's total order of 44.8 million doses of vaccines.