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ENDEMIC PHASE STILL A FAR-OFF GOAL

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ENDEMIC PHASE STILL A FAR-OFF GOAL THARANYA ARUMUGAM KUALA LUMPUR
 news@ns t.com.my Malaysia still far from Covid-19 endemic phase, say experts »
PAGE 10 IN OMICRON'S SHADOW Low booster shot rate a 'ticking time bomb' for new variants, say experts MALAYSIA is still far from transitioning i n t o t h e e n d e m i c phase amid the presence of the more transmissible Omicron variant coupled with the low number of people having received Covid-19 booster shots. Experts said additional measures were needed to contain the virus spread, which included ramping up the administering of booster doses and adding booster jabs as being "fully vaccinated". E p i d e m i o l o g i s t P r o f e s s o r Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud of Universiti Malaya said Malaysia should make plans for the long-term management of Covid-19, but should not transition into an endemic phase until data showed otherwise. "We are nowhere near the endemic phase. People are bandying the term 'endemic' with little understanding of what it means." So far, 4.5 million people have received their booster shots, but a large portion of the 4.5 million has been in Sarawak because the state government was pushing for it in preparation for the state elec tion. "Once boosters shots have reached most of the Sarawak population, the rate in the rest of the country will slow down. That's why it needs to be stepped up," he told the New Straits Times in response to the significant risks and uncertainties presented by the Omicron variant. Dr Awang Bulgiba said vaccine manufacturers were working hard to design Omicron-specific vaccines, as evidence showed that high levels of antibodies could help protect against infection and severe disease. The Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry's Covid-19 Epidemiological Analysis and Strategies Task Force chairman further said all imported cases should be held in designated quarantine stations instead of home quarantine to slow down and reduce the community spread of Omicron. "This will buy us some time, but we must not be complacent." Omicron is now present in more than 70 countries and it is A man receiving a booster dose of the Sinovac Covid-19 vaccine as other recipients await their turn in the background at the Tzu Chi multipurpose hall in Melaka on Friday. PIC BY SYAFEEQ AHMAD spreading rapidly. "The good news is that it is detectable by the RT-PCR tests and the S-gene target failure (SGTF) is a quick way to make a presumptive identification of the Omicron before whole genome sequencing is carried out." He added that current measures to check arrivals should include compulsory testing using the RT-PCR test, with SGTF for those with negative RT-PCR results who were allowed to quarantine at home. They should also be tracked electronically and g i v - e n another RT-P CR test before they are allowed to end their q u a r a n t i n e. Molecular virologist Dr Vinod Balasubramaniam, a senior lecturer (microbiology) at the Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences in Monash University Malaysia, said the Omicron variant was far more transmissible than Delta, with a doubling time (how long it takes for the number of coronavirus cases to double) of just two to three days. Datuk Dr Bulgiba Mahmud Despite some claims, he said it was premature to conclude that Omicron would cause mild illness with few consequences. "For example, in South Africa's Omicron wave, infected people tended to be younger compared with previous waves, and we know that younger people are more likely to h a v e m i l d e r s y m p t o m s when infected with C o v i d - 1 9 . " A n d g i v e n the time lag bet w e e n i n f e c t i o n s , a n d deaths, it is still too soon even for South Africa to pick up a signal in its excess death monitoring system, one of the few real-time systems among low- and middle-income countrie s. "Omicron is coming at us fast, but its full impact will take time to become apparent." He said while emerging data showed that a booster dose would restore the level of vaccine effectiveness, many people globally had not had any doses of vaccine. A country's main goal, he

saidAwang Awang Dr Vinod B should be to protect the healthcare system from being completely overwhelmed by conducting vaccinations, including booster doses. "Getting three doses of vaccines is the strongest form of protection until a variant-specific booster is ready."We will need strategies worldwide to enhance vaccine equity and access, and to scale up other protective measures alongside vaccines."The new criteria to qualify for the fully vaccinated status should include booster doses for all eligible age groups." We should get back to our previous rates of vaccination to stop this ticking time bomb."That, plus strict re-enforcement of public health measures, should be able to protect us against this variant."In the face of the Omicron risk, Dr Vinod said a country's number one priority should be to vaccinate the unvaccinated, especially those at highest risk. "The government should make available free rapid antigen tests and high-filtration masks to households, even by mail. "Visitors to high-risk settings, such as nursing homes, should do a rapid test and not visit if the test is positive." Physical distancing ventilating indoor spaces, hand hygiene, avoiding crowds, and reducing one's number of social contacts can also control Omicron transmission."Public health expert and epidemiologist Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said Malaysia should continue to observe strict standard operating procedures and enhance surveillance at all international entry points, especially testing before, on arrival and post arrival, mandatory quarantine and contact tracing for incoming travellers, particularly those coming in from high-risk countries.Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar

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