

# 'NO AGE GROUP IS IMMUNE TO COVID-19'

Deaths among younger people show virus does not discriminate, say health experts

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**T**HE deaths of three people in their 40s due to Covid-19 in Malaysia recently demonstrate that the virus does not discriminate and is potentially fatal for people from all age groups, said health experts.

Rejecting the perception that only the elderly were susceptible, they said no one was immune to the infection and could even become superspreaders of the virus.

Epidemiologist Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said there was a possibility that the death toll could rise following the spike in cases in recent weeks.

"All age groups can contract Covid-19. Even babies have been known to die from Covid-19. No age group is immune.

"There have been reports of young people dying from Covid-19 elsewhere in the world even though deaths are reportedly higher among the elderly," he told the *New Straits Times*.

The Universiti Malaya professor was commenting on three new deaths on Sunday involving two people aged 41 and 44 in Sabah, as well as a 46-year-old in Selangor, which bucks the trend of generally older victims.

The Health Ministry said the patients aged 41 and 46 did not display any health complications unlike the other victim who suffered from heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and dyslipidemia.

Dr Awang said although the nation's Covid-19 fatality rate was low at 0.9 per cent, by virtue of the denominator growing, the number of deaths would continue to climb.

"As more people from all age groups are infected, Covid-19 deaths among all age groups are also likely to result."

On whether anyone could be a Covid-19 superspreader, he said it depended on one's viral load.

"Viral load depends on virus genotype and the body's response to the virus. Anyone can be a superspreader if the condi-



Physical distancing has become the new norm as seen in this food court in Kuala Lumpur yesterday PIC BY FATHIL ASRI.



Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud



Dr Malina Osman



Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar

tions are right.

"Some people are unaware they are infected, whether they are asymptomatic or having only mild symptoms. But they can still transmit the disease. It is unclear whether asymptomatic patients will transmit the virus as effectively as someone with symptoms, but they are still able to."

Melaka Manipal Medical College's community and occupational medicine professor Dr G. Jayakumar expressed concern that Malaysia recorded the death of a 1-year-old girl due to Covid-19 earlier this month in Tawau, making her the country's youngest known victim.

The World Health Organisation, he said, had also announced the increase of infections among younger people.

He described the shift of the

pandemic trend towards the younger demographic, who were classified as mild cases or asymptomatic, as a worrying sign.

"The worrying issue is that many of them live with older or vulnerable individuals. Those who are positive with the virus but have mild symptoms or no symptoms at all are the silent carriers of disease.

"They unknowingly spread the illness to others. The young and old both have the potential to be superspreaders."

He said young people were not entirely shielded from Covid-19.

"It is believed with the opening up of workplaces, business entities and institutions of higher education, people are mingling in proximity, resulting in higher Covid-19 cases.

"More Covid-19 screenings by

the ministry have shown that there are higher cases among the young and old," he added.

However, Universiti Putra Malaysia epidemiology and biostatistics expert Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman believed that the significance of Sunday's fatalities among younger patients with no underlying health conditions was inconclusive due to the limited information released by the ministry on their health history.

"Among the documented causes of death among young patients were delays in access to health-care services, history of immunity abnormality, those with pulmonary abnormality and other underlying chronic disorders.

"Some of them were unaware that they had a chronic disorder, such as undiagnosed hypertension or dyslipidemia," she said.

Young and healthy adults, she added, could be potential Covid-19 superspreaders but the clinical manifestations varied from the spectrum of being asymptomatic to having severe infections, depending on one's immune response.

"The risk of infections is similar to all age groups and it falls in the hands of the people whether they comply with the recommended standard operating procedure (SOP) and preventive measures. Based on the current trend, it is expected that the number of cases will increase due to active contact tracing."

Malaysian Public Health Physicians' Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said Covid-19 could infect young and healthy people and cause deaths due to extensive organ damage in the lungs.

"Most infected young people are mild cases and many are asymptomatic. They are active and can be a source of infections in workplaces, institutions and the community.

"However, the elderly with chronic diseases are high on the list of risk of infection and death due to Covid-19. Other high-risk individuals include those who are obese, smokers, drug addicts as well as chronic alcoholics."

Dr Zainal stressed the importance of adhering to the new norms and SOP to break the chain of Covid-19 transmissions and to protect vulnerable groups.