

'Help of recovered patients vital'

Study to determine immunity crucial in fight against coronavirus, say experts

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PETALING JAYA: The Health Ministry's research on Covid-19 immunity in recovered patients will help determine if those who have already recovered are immune or need to be vaccinated, say public health experts.

Universiti Malaya expert virologist Prof Dr Sazaly Abu Bakar said this consideration will be necessary when the vaccine becomes available in the future.

"When the vaccine becomes available, do we need to immunise those who have been infected before?"

"If we know that they were exposed and were protected, we may recruit them to be the frontliners because they will be safe if exposed," he said in an interview.

Dr Sazaly said that former Covid-19 patients should come forward to help the Health Ministry with this immunity study.

"The study is important because we want to know how long a person's immunity remains protective.

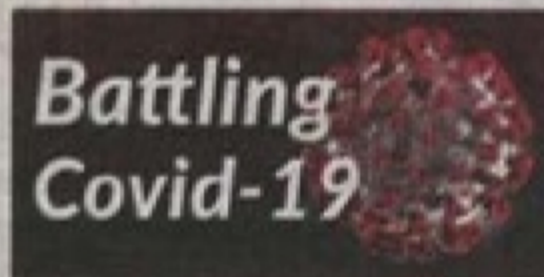
"Those who are infected may or may not develop sufficient immunity to protect them from another exposure," he added.

Universiti Malaya public health medicine specialist Prof Dr Victor Hoe also called on former patients who have fully recovered to join the study.

"Since it is a novel disease, we still don't have a full understanding of how the body immune system responds to the infection.

"This will allow us to understand the immunity from Covid-19 infection," he said, adding that the response from those who have mild and severe infections are also different.

He said studies have found that asymptomatic and mild patients produced the neutralising antibody, although the titres were lower than those patients who have severe symptoms like pneumonia.



"By understanding how the body responds, we will be able to decide if those who have already recovered are immune to the disease or need to be vaccinated.

"We will only know this if we follow up with patients who have recovered," he said, adding that the blood sample result of a patient who had recovered from the D614G mutation of the virus would not be different from another.

Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist and biostatistician Asso Prof Dr Malina Osman concurred, saying the study would let experts understand the natural response of antibodies and how long it sustains in the body.

"If the antibodies are not sus-

tained, it means those who had been infected are at risk of getting reinfected," she said, adding that the study would provide insights for better treatment and prevention besides a vaccine – once it is found.

Malaysian Public Health Physicians' Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar also urged recovered patients to come forward, noting that the research would improve the country's knowledge about the virus and ways to fight it.

On Oct 13, Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah called on Malaysians who were previously infected with Covid-19 to volunteer for the study – titled *Longitudinal Study of Neutralising Antibody Response among Covid-19 Patients in Malaysia*, conducted by a group of researchers from the ministry's Institute for Medical Research.

The study that began in August will run until July 2022 has been approved by the ministry's Medical

Research and Ethics Committee.

Dr Samsu Ambia Ismail, 49, a medical doctor who was infected in March, said he was willing to help in the research.

"As a former patient, they treated me so well. To pay it back, I am willing to volunteer.

"I think it's just giving my blood sample and there's no operation involved, so it should be fine," he said, adding that he was, however, not sure what the study entailed as the methodology and process were not mentioned.

The country's 49th Covid-19 patient, who wants to remain anonymous, said he had no qualms helping the ministry again to understand the disease better.

"I had donated my blood plasma for an antibody study after my recovery in mid-March.

"My blood was taken three times in two months," he said, adding that those who have recently recovered should also join the study as a person's antibodies could change.