

# 'REDUCE PRICES TO ENCOURAGE TESTING'

Expert says this will reduce burden on govt facilities, bolster ministry's pandemic response

DHESEGAAN BALA KRISHNAN  
KUALA LUMPUR  
news@nst.com.my

**R**EDUCING the price of Covid-19 screening tests could bolster the Health Ministry's pandemic response, an epidemiologist suggested yesterday.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman said making Covid-19 screening affordable was vital to reduce the burden on government facilities.

"Cost is still one of the biggest limiting factors in our attempt to improve mass testing.

"At present, RTK Antigen test kits cost about RM40 when purchased in bulk. I believe lowering the cost of screening is possible if we have price control mechanisms in place.

"Reducing the cost of screening can stem the spread of Covid-19 as close contacts of positive cases can get themselves tested immediately at private labs and clinics without having to wait to get it done at public hospitals.

"But if screening is still expensive, then people may hesitate to get themselves tested," she told the *New Straits Times*.

She encouraged the Health Ministry to prepare more health promotion materials that could be easily understood by the public.

"Most materials available now are difficult for the public to access and often written in highly technical language (and printed) with small fonts.

"Since we need community



Healthcare workers handling a Covid-19 screening sample in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

participation right now, especially from those who have been placed under home surveillance, we need more effective materials to guide them."

Dr Malina said the Health Ministry should coordinate and run continuous Covid-19 health surveys in collaboration with higher

learning institutions.

"The surveys can include the tracking of new mutated strains, genetic sequencing, molecular studies based on local data, socio-behavioural risks and many other aspects.

"In this regard, the ministry should also pay attention to data

management. The selection of indicators to observe and data dissemination should be able to help policymakers as well as empower the community to take the appropriate preventive measures."

On Jan 19, Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said the ministry projected

that Malaysia's daily new Covid-19 infections could hit 8,000 by the third week of March.

But on Jan 30, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Adham Baba said the country was at the plateau stage after logging 5,728 new cases a day, the highest since the pandemic began.

Meanwhile, another medical expert who wants to remain anonymous criticised several parties, such as condominium managements, for creating their own risk assessment without referring to the Health Ministry's guidelines.

"Being overcautious and requiring unnecessary Covid-19 screenings could swamp our testing labs. This could lead to a backlog in samples to be tested, which could delay contact tracing efforts.

"The ministry should not allow this. At this critical juncture, it is crucial we use our resources wisely," he said.

Another medical practitioner, who wants to be known only as Sean, described the ministry's management of the pandemic as a "knee-jerk response".

"We have adopted a more reactive approach than a proactive one. Whenever we register a spike in cases, only then do we intensify contact tracing.

"Honestly, healthcare workers are frustrated because current strategies only appear to be damage-control measures.

"Instead of conducting random testing, we should utilise predictive analytic models to predict the spread and zero in on targeted areas, like New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam have done.

"Then enforce MCO (Movement Control Order) or a Conditional MCO in those targeted areas until no new cases are recorded.

"The government should also expedite the vaccine supply and prioritise healthcare workers and other vulnerable groups for inoculation," he said.