

Experts: Jab not an automatic licence to travel

By **CLARISSA CHUNG**

newsdesk@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: Other factors also need to be considered – and not just the completion of the vaccine regimen – when deciding whether interstate travel should be allowed at this stage, say health experts.

Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said the success of the vaccination programme should not be the sole criterion for whether a person could travel across state borders.

“In my opinion, we have to also look at the current trend such as the number of active cases and those who are critically ill.

“We must look at the behavioural patterns too, whether compliance is good or poor, as well as whether there is a significant proportion of vaccinated individuals among the high-risk groups,” she added.

Dr Malina said that while opening interstate travel for vaccinated individuals might partly encourage people to get inoculated, she said other avenues must also be explored simultaneously to get people to sign up for the jabs.

She said it would be relatively unfair to allow those who had been completely vaccinated to travel interstate at this time.

“Currently, those who are fully vaccinated make up only about 1% to 2% of the population.

“In other words, our current

access to vaccines is limited and those in phases 2 and 3 have to wait their turn.

“If those who are fully vaccinated are allowed to travel interstate at this stage, people may perceive that this policy is favouring certain groups of people.

“It is also anticipated that people may no longer treat the standard operating procedure as high priority.

“Furthermore, it will be difficult to monitor those vaccinated and those not yet vaccinated when they are intermingling,” she added.

Recently, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the government would decide whether those who had completed their two-dose Covid-19 vaccine regimen could travel freely between states and districts.

“I have discussed this at the National Security Council meeting.

“We want to decide if this is the case, those who have received two doses can travel across states and districts,” he said, adding that international travel could soon be possible for those vaccinated.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Adham Baba said the authorities were still reviewing the findings of the World Health Organisation and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the matter.

Public health specialist Assoc Prof Dr Mohammad Farhan Rusli from International Islamic University of Malaysia said the possibility

of allowing interstate travel for those vaccinated was one way to get people to register for the vaccine, but there were risks involved.

“Enticing people with freedom of movement will benefit in getting those who value travel to register.

“However, there are still risks associated with this as we are still in the early stages of understanding the vaccine and how long the protection will last.

“While interstate travel can be an encouragement, these ‘green’ travellers will still need to observe the standard operating procedure for now,” said Dr Mohammad Farhan who is on the Selangor Covid-19 Task Force Committee.

However, Malaysian Medical Association president Datuk Dr Subramaniam Muniandy said fully vaccinated individuals had practically no risk of getting or transmitting the infection.

“It must be made clear that even with vaccination, Covid-19 will not disappear.

“The aim is to make it less common and less lethal.

“Once vaccinated, people are less prone to get or spread the disease.

“Therefore, they should be allowed to resume normal activities so that the economy can recover.

“We don’t have to wait until Covid-19 reaches zero case as that will not happen anytime soon,” he added.

On April 2, the CDC published guidance which said that fully vaccinated people can resume domes-

tic travel and do not need to get tested or self-quarantine before or after travel.

In other countries such as the United Kingdom, people are allowed to travel within the country as the vaccination programme is rolled out, though this allowance is still subject to people’s adherence to the law.

“The ‘stay at home’ rule will end on March 29 but many restrictions will remain in place.

“People should continue to work from home where they can and minimise the number of journeys they make where possible, avoiding travel at the busiest times and routes.

“Travel abroad will continue to be prohibited, other than for a small number of permitted reasons.

“Holidays abroad will not be allowed, given that it will remain important to manage the risk of imported variants and protect the vaccination programme,” said the UK government’s website.

Thailand announced on March 31 that restrictions for interprovincial travel had eased, with public transportation resuming normal operations.

In other countries, there are existing domestic travel restrictions in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

For instance in Australia, certain states like Victoria have set up restrictions such as requiring people to apply for a permit before entering the area.