

A tough choice

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PETALING JAYA: There are two options: allow prisoners to have visitors and risk a surge in Covid-19 infections, or keep visitors out and risk further deterioration in the mental wellbeing of inmates.

Human rights activists and at least one health expert are in favour of a Prisons Department proposal to allow visitors again, under strict adherence with standard operating procedures (SOP).

They said getting to meet family members would be good for prisoners.

On the other hand, the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) said it was premature to lift the ban on visits, given that the Covid infection rate remains high.

The Prisons Department banned all visits when the country went into its first movement control order on March 18 last year.

In an announcement this week, the department said visits will now be allowed under strict observance of the SOP.

Those who wish to visit prisoners will have to make an appointment through the i-visit system at ivisit.prison.gov.my, or via phone call, email or letter.

Upon receipt of such requests, the

➤ Allowing visitors at prisons may lead to more infections, but barring them is bad for inmates' mental health

department will set a date and time for the visit.

Human rights non-governmental organisation Eliminating Death and Abuse in Custody Together (Edict) said it is the right of every detainee to receive visitors.

Edict executive director Khalid Mohd Ismath said allowing visitors will have a positive impact on the mental health of inmates.

"It will also enable meetings with lawyers to prepare for trial," he told *theSun*.

"We believe the Prisons Department has enough staff to handle the visits and to ensure the SOP is strictly observed."

"Prison staff must be very strict in ensuring every visitor and inmate observes the SOP, such as ensuring social distancing and use of hand sanitisers."

He added that the Health Ministry could train prison staff on how to ensure the SOP is followed.

Alternatively, prison authorities should

consider allowing online meetings between inmates and their families or lawyers.

Human Rights Commission of Malaysia commissioner Jerald Joseph pointed out that isolation and the lack of human contact are unhealthy for prisoners.

"It has been recommended in the Mandela Rules that family or close contact visits must be allowed," he said.

The Nelson Mandela Rules emphasise the provision of healthcare for prisoners as a state responsibility, and that the relationship between healthcare professionals and prisoners is governed by the same ethical and professional standards as those applicable to patients in the community.

Jerald also said such a move would be good for the mental wellbeing of prisoners who have been deprived of familial contact for a long time.

Bad idea even with strict SOP in place: MMA chief

Universiti Putra Malaysia associate professor and health expert Dr Malina Osman said as long as there were no clusters or infections at the particular prison, it would be acceptable to allow visitors.

"The Prisons Department has to ensure that the SOP is in place, is strictly enforced and visitors and prisoners are monitored to prevent

cross-infection," Malina said.

MMA president Datuk Dr M. Subramaniam said the time was not suitable yet for prisoners to receive visitors, given the high number of new cases that is being recorded daily.

Malaysia has been recording more than 1,000 new cases each day for several weeks.

"Prisons are like a breeding ground for the coronavirus. Many of the main clusters were from prisons and congested worker hostels," said Subramaniam.

He pointed out that even with the SOP strictly enforced, it would still be a bad idea as it may increase the already high infectivity rate that the country is currently dealing with.

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