

Be vigilant and guard against complacency, say experts

PETALING JAYA: Malaysians must continue to be on their guard against Covid-19 or face the prospect of soaring infections like last year, health experts say.

Malaysian Medical Association president Prof Datuk Dr M. Subramaniam agreed that Malaysia could expect a major rise in cases, but said this could be offset by stricter law enforcement and self-regulation.

"We need stricter enforcement than what we have now because people tend to get too relaxed.

"Looking at the way sectors have been opening up, people moving around and the crowding taking place, surely the number of cases will rise like what has happened in India.

"With Hari Raya Aidilfitri happening in May, people will surely want to visit their relatives, but they must be patient.

"To save our families and ourselves, we must follow the standard operating procedure and get vac-

nated," he said.

Dr Subramaniam added that while many Malaysians were still hesitant about getting vaccinated, they had nothing to fear as the risks were minimal.

"Vaccination is a must if we want to save lives," he said.

Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said the Health Ministry's projections of nearly 5,000 new cases by the end of May was likely to happen if the rules were flouted.

She said if Malaysians were not vigilant, Covid-19 cases were likely to fill up the country's hospitals and quarantine centres.

"We have observed that in the past year, cases or clusters would rise every time we had activities in which the SOP was not adhered to.

"We can't afford to let our healthcare system be compromised like what is happening in some other

countries like India," she said.

India's healthcare system is increasingly being overwhelmed by a second wave of Covid-19 cases.

Its hospitals have reported a chronic shortage of beds, with intensive care unit beds at almost full occupancy rates in major cities.

The country, which recorded over 300,000 new Covid-19 cases on Thursday alone, is also facing a severe oxygen supply shortage for patients.

Meanwhile, Dr Malina said the SOP is more likely to be neglected when people meet family members or close friends.

"When we meet someone we love, we tend to sit close to them and when talking to them, we take off our masks as it is perceived as more convenient," she added.

She also said that while issues related to quarantine centres would have been addressed by the Health Ministry, resources to treat patients have a certain limit if the numbers

are too high.

"The Health Ministry also needs to provide services to non-Covid-19 cases, so we must do our best to avoid a potential drastic increase in the numbers," she added.

Public health expert Prof Datuk Dr Lokman Hakim Sulaiman from the International Medical University said banning certain activities would not be enough if the SOP was not followed in everyday life.

"It is not just about Hari Raya or Ramadan bazaars. In Kelantan, despite the bazaars being banned, cases continue to spike.

"It's also not just because of interstate travel, as Kelantan and Sarawak in particular continue to see a spike even though interstate travel is still limited in all states.

"The public must be made to understand that the bigger the crowd, the higher the risk.

"It is also better to go to outdoor restaurants with open ventilation rather than eating indoors," he said.

Dr Lokman Hakim added that superspreader events often do not happen randomly as there is always an element of irresponsibility.

"It's time to emphasise that we have to be responsible citizens if we want to see significant changes.

"The government must also ensure good case investigation, contact tracing and case detection. When there is a large number of sporadic cases, the government should then ask whether it has done enough," he said.

Medical Practitioners Coalition Association of Malaysia president Dr Raj Kumar Maharajah said people had become more complacent compared to last year.

He warned that if Malaysians were not more careful, the spike in cases could lead to an overburdened healthcare system.

"If the SOP is not adhered to, we will see healthcare facilities stretched and frontliners will not be able to cope," he added.