

'Booster shots can wait'

Virologist: Priority towards completing two-dose vaccination

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PETALING JAYA: The jury is still out among health experts on the need for Covid-19 booster shots.

At this point, Universiti Malaya virologist Prof Dr Sazaly Abu Bakar said there was not enough data to support the need for booster shots although he noted that data from Israel had suggested that the immunity levels of those who had received the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine waned after six months.

But he said the United Kingdom government was already mulling on giving out booster shots, besides conducting clinical trials for it.

"There are two main reasons why there is a need for booster shots. The first is because there is a waning immune response and the second is perhaps the current vaccine is less effective against the new variants. So, perhaps a booster shot with a slightly different vaccine version could overcome the problem," he said when contacted.

However, Dr Sazaly said before considering vaccinating the population with a booster shot, priority must be given towards completing the two-dose vaccination for the entire adult population.

Then, he said consideration must be given on whether to vaccinate the adolescents.

"With the Delta variant, the age of the people getting infected are getting younger. So, when we start finishing vaccinating the adult population, it will leave the adolescents vulnerable," he said.

Nonetheless, Dr Sazaly said the government should take the initia-



Doing their part: Foreign workers filling up forms to get inoculated at PPV Midlands in Shah Alam.
— SS KANESAN/The Star

tive now to procure the booster shot vaccines for early next year.

"If we don't do the bookings now, perhaps when the time comes, there may not be vaccines available for us.

"I suggest we should start thinking of procuring the vaccines for early next year and preferably a version that is different than what we are currently using," he said.

Several countries are already mulling inoculating their population with booster shots after the Delta variant, first detected in India last year, is fuelling a new wave of

infections globally.

Pfizer chief scientific officer Mikael Dolsten had previously said that its vaccine is effective against the Delta variant but after six months, there is a likely risk of reinfection as antibodies wane.

AstraZeneca CEO Pascal Soriot told US business news network CNBC that it was not yet sure whether a third dose of its vaccine would be necessary for continued protection against the virus.

Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman also believed that a

full report and related clinical studies should proceed before deciding on a third dose.

For now, she said that efforts should focus on vaccinating the adult population especially those who are high risk, noting that the total population of those fully vaccinated was only at 25.3% as of Friday.

"For the time being, no (need for a third dose). We have to wait until all adults in the country have been fully vaccinated. But the discussion on this possibility (for a third dose) may need to be considered based

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on updated information and clinical findings soon," she said.

As the government has said that they have ordered enough Covid-19 vaccines to cover more than 130% of the population, Dr Sazaly believed that this is insufficient if the booster shots are taken into consideration.

"We must remember that all vaccines have an expiry date. We can't keep our vaccines for next year. We probably also need to consider a different version of vaccines against what we are already using. So, you can't save the vaccines we have now for next year," he said.

If there is a need for booster shots, Medical Practitioners Coalition Association of Malaysia president Dr Raj Kumar Maharajah said it must not be the existing Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine but one that covers the new mutations of the virus.

But, Dr Raj believed that the purchase of booster shots should be put on hold first.

"We have to get the new vaccines that cover the latest strains. If we purchase it too early we are going to be stuck with the old ones that do not cover the new variants," he said.