

Easing of restrictions not licence to lower our guard, warn experts

KUALA LUMPUR: Experts have cautioned the people to stay vigilant and be extra careful following the announcement that several activities will be allowed for fully vaccinated individuals in states under Phase Two and beyond of the National Recovery Plan.

They said this was because the threat from Covid-19 was far from over.

Malaysian Public Health Physicians Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said the public should be extra careful given the emergence of new Covid-19 variants, such as the dominant and highly contagious Delta.

"We should not be overconfident although the government has given the relaxations. The vaccinated population is still less than 40 per cent on top of the large number of daily infections.

"Moreover, our health facilities are still overburdened by the rise in cases. The onus is on the people to be cautious. They must practise the standard operating procedures (SOP) strictly," he told the *New Straits Times*.

Dr Zainal also felt that the home quarantine for overseas returnees and travellers might not be a good decision by the government.

Medical Mythbusters Malaysia president and co-founder Dr Ahmad Firdaus Mohd Haris said everyone should be "very cautious" and the people should tread carefully with the "partial freedom".

"Hospital admissions and intensive care unit utilisation still remains high throughout the country. We are seeing more young, healthy people succumb to Covid-19, which may be due to the Delta variant as well as the fact that more of the elderly have been vaccinated.

"Some of these Phase 2 states have health facilities that are not at the level of those in the Greater Klang Valley. An uncontrolled outbreak may have dire consequences," he said.

Epidemiologist and biostatistician from Universiti Putra Malaysia, Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman, said this was not the right time to ease the restrictions.

"Currently, we are facing a highly infectious Delta variant. Also, fully vaccinated individuals

may get infected and pass on the virus to others.

"We should wait until critical and active cases go down to at least half the current numbers. Today (yesterday), we recorded the highest number of deaths.

"The easing of the restrictions may introduce new cases or clusters, which could further burden our healthcare system."

Of the activities that were allowed, the one on dining at restaurants should be deferred, said Dr Malina.

"I think we should defer this, unless we ensure a safety bubble throughout the process.

"In addition, all staff in the restaurants should be fully vaccinated as well and the ventilation must be maintained."

Alliance for Safe Community chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye said the people should not abuse the freedom.

He said there was a need to overcome the euphoria of people who thought they would not get Covid-19 after being fully vaccinated.

"The people must not be lulled into thinking they are safe when it has been proven that even with the two doses, one can be infected.

"The vaccine is for internal protection while face masks are external so both must go together. People should not lower their guard.

"I understand the importance of balancing life and livelihood, and as long as the government has enough facts to justify the reopening of some activities, that is good enough.

"We have to live with the virus as I do not think it can be eradicated in the foreseeable future. Therefore, people still need to protect themselves," said Lee.

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (Matta) president Datuk Mohd Khalid Harun described the reopening of domestic tourism as an important move to balance out losses.

"Matta thanks the government for listening to our call to allow individuals who have already completed both doses of the vaccination to travel for the purpose of domestic tourism.

"For our members, especially hotels and homestays, this is great news." **Additional reporting by Dawn Chan, Hana Naz Harun and Teoh Pei Ying**



Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar