

EXPERT: WE CAN DROP MASK MANDATE SOON

Another expert disagrees, saying large segments of population still vulnerable

VEENA BABULAL
KUALA LUMPUR
news@nst.com.my

SOME experts believe that Malaysia could soon be ready to take the next step in its transition to endemicity by loosening its mask mandate, which has been in place since March 2020.

However, others preached caution, noting that data suggests that there is still some way to go before the universal mask mandate can be dropped altogether.

Epidemiologist and public health expert, Associate Prof Dr Malina Osman of Universiti Putra Malaysia, said the country's improving Covid-19 situation could warrant a review of the mask mandate.

Dr Malina, who had formerly served in the Health Ministry's public health division, reckoned that the authorities could opt to drop the mask mandate for most indoor spaces within the next one to two weeks.

Commenting on the Singapore government's recent announcement that it would soon drop the use of face masks for some indoor settings, Dr Malina said she agreed with the move.

"I am inclined to agree with Malaysia emulating Singapore. The current endemic transition

phase has been ongoing for almost five months.

"Data analysis has found that all indicators on active, new cases, numbers in intensive care units (ICU) and deaths are within a manageable range," she said.

She noted that the number of Covid-19 patients warded in ICUs nationwide hit a peak of 1,502 at the height of the Delta variant wave in the second quarter of 2021.

At present there are only 68 patients warded in ICU facilities nationwide.

"Even with the threat of Omicron sub-variants and recent potential spike in cases (6th wave), the situation remains under control so far. The wave is now registering a decreasing pattern.

"In the past five months, the presence of new clusters and impact of the infections have not been as serious as what we experienced during previous Delta or Alpha Beta waves when vaccines were still not available.

"This is despite the prevalent levels of non-compliance with the standard operating procedures (SOP) in Malaysia, and the average and discouraging uptake registered for the third and fourth booster, respectively."

She said the fact that borders were opened, tourists and business travellers welcomed back, and pilgrims being allowed to

travel for their haj in batches to Saudi Arabia and home without much incident meant that the situation was under control.

On Sunday, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said masks would soon be required only on public transport, where people were in prolonged close contact in a crowded space, and in healthcare settings like clinics, hospitals and residential and nursing homes where there were vulnerable people. Lee, however, did not state

or hint when the mandate would be dropped.

Meanwhile, fellow epidemiologist Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said the decision to drop universal use of face masks, often regarded as the first-line of defence against easily transmissible respiratory disease, needs to be guided by data.

"Official data indicates that more than 80 per cent of the population have been vaccinated with two doses although there is vaccine effective-

ness variability with the different types of vaccines that we have used so far.

"However, only 50 per cent of the population has been boosted, leaving a large segment of the population with sub-optimal immunity, especially against the newer variants.

"Singapore, on the other hand,



Associate Prof Dr Malina Osman



Dr Safiya Amaran



People, wearing face masks, walking on the street of Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur. FILE PIC

reports that more than 90 per cent of its population has been vaccinated (mainly with mRNA vaccines) and nearly 80 per cent of its population having been boosted.

"Large segments of our population are also still vulnerable to severe Covid-19. According to official numbers, our Covid-19 death rate per million people is three times that of Singapore, possibly due to our low booster rate. So in short, we are not yet ready to remove the indoor mask mandate," said the Universiti Malaya professor.

Public health specialist Dr Safiya Amaran also advised caution, adding that mandatory face mask requirements should only be dropped after a six-month period when mortality rates plateau.

"If you look at the mortality rates, it averages about 10 deaths a day now and has been stable since May. It was still quite high in March and April, so we need more time to observe how this goes before making such a crucial

decision," she said, adding that the earliest review on the mandate decision can only be made at the end of the year.

On Tuesday, Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah told the *New Straits Times* that there are no plans yet to emulate Singapore in loosening the mask mandate.

"No, not yet ready. It's status quo at the moment," he said in a brief reply to a question on the nation's preparedness and relevant indicators to remove the mandate.

Outdoor usage of face masks stopped being mandatory in Malaysia as of May 1.

In early July, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin had cautioned the public that the authorities could reintroduce compounds on those who fail to wear face masks in closed spaces if Covid-19 cases continue to spike.

He said ministry officers had observed that people had become nonchalant with regard to wearing face masks indoors, which was still compulsory.



Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud