Experts: S’pore’s ability to deal with threat has improved since Sars

Singapore’s medical community and the nation as a whole are far better prepared to deal with the Wuhan coronavirus than they were in 2003, when the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) emerged, says the Straits Times senior health correspondent.

“The is a good chance that there will be no, or very limited, community spread in Singapore if we keep up with what we are doing thus far,” says Professor Chia Kee Sung, a senior epidemiologist from the SingHealth Duke-NUS Medical School.

He says Singapore is one of the most outbreak-ready nations after having learn from the lessons of Sars.

Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, the infectious diseases programme leader at the Singapore National University of Singapore Duke-NUS Medical School, says that serious outbreak in the world, including the United States and Singapore, are far more likely to spread to other countries.

He has also been paying close attention to the “typical Sars” outbreak in Wuhan in November 2019, and we woke up to the realisation of Sars only when it was already in Singapore,” he adds.

The school’s dean, Professor Teo Yik Ying, feels Singapore has done well on several fronts to tackle the threat of the Wuhan coronavirus, particularly on the nimbleness and agility of multiple sectors to respond in a coordinated manner.

A multi-sectoral task force covering key sectors, including health, education, transport, and trade, was set up before Singapore had a single confirmed case.

Prof Teo says this allowed for a truly coordinated approach that attempts to comprehensively address the multifaceted challenges that the new virus poses to Singapore.

SINGAPORE: The country was quick to take precautions after China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) on Dec 31 last year of the emergence of an unknown bug that causes pneumonia.

By Jan 2, Singapore had alerted all doctors to watch out for symptomatic patients with a history of travel to Wuhan. The next day, it started temperature screening for all inbound flights from Wuhan.

It also activated protocols to deal with the possible outbreak, including having special ambulances on duty, suspicious cases, and paramedics geared up with personal protective equipment.

Prof Chia and Prof Hsu are epidemiologists, or experts who study trends, causes, patterns and outcomes of diseases and other public health hazards, and possible ways to control or contain them.

Prof Wang is a scientist and Prof Teo is a statistician. They say Singapore is much better prepared and equipped on the medical front.

The health authorities’ better equipped and better equipped, not only in the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), but also in the major hospitals, says Prof Chia.

Prof Hsu says surveillance systems are vastly improved, as is the capability of every hospital to address an epidemic, to respond to potential cases of the novel virus and other sources.

Prof Teo agrees that Singapore’s ability and capacity to handle any infections disease threat of this nature are very different today compared with the days of Sars.

The NCID at Tan Tock Seng Hospital was established to address this, as there are already 27 surveillance hospitals in Singapore.

Prof Teo says that Singapore’s clinical ability to manage infectious risks has improved.

Prof Teo says there are currently 150 emergency departments across the country – including public health institutions, specialists, strategists, epidemiologists, and even medical students – working together to look at understanding and combating the coronavirus, as well as its impact on Singapore.

He also praised Singapore’s response to issues of public concern, citing the decision to give $100 a day to self-employed locals, employees of small and medium-sized enterprises, to minimise the personal and corporate impact. This was also done during the Sars crisis.

Another good move, he says, is providing every household with four masks. This should allay concerns of any shortage of face masks.

He adds that in a crisis, keeping up with communication with the public is more important. Having ministries fronting public communications, together with well-recognised experts like NCID head Professor Yeo Seng, who has a strong reputation of being one of the leaders who guided Singapore through Sars, reassures people that there is a competent team at the helm.

“They have taken Singapore through one crisis before, and can do the same for the current threat,” Prof Teo says.

As to whether the measures taken so far are necessary, given that there is no community spread of the virus, Prof Chia says it is too early to say, but it may even be over-reaction, but there is no need to panic or be overly fearful.

“Though Sars is still early days, the mortality rate does not appear to be as high as it was, although it will be more contagious,” he says.

Prof Hsu thinks the Wuhan virus may be harder to stop than Sars.

He says that Singapore will have to think of how to live with the virus circulating in the world without such a vaccine, as an effective vaccine becomes available.

But Prof Wang says Singapore has already successfully cultured the virus from a patient, from a patient, giving it a head start in developing diagnostic and test vaccines and drug candidates, he says.

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