No gathering is harmless while virus lurks

Some of Singapore’s largest clusters had their origins in seemingly innocuous events, like a CNY family gathering or dinner at Safra

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Many people have had their fill of staying at home, and some are yearning to see other family members who do not live with them. They are looking forward to a weekend with parents or siblings, where the children can play with their cousins. Take a deep breath. Think again. Some super spreader events have had their origins in seemingly harmless gatherings. One of the bigger clusters in Singapore – the 25-person Grace Assembly of God Church cluster – had its beginnings in a small Chinese New Year family gathering in Mei Hwa Drive. It was attended by a couple on Jan 25. One of them had no symptoms at all, while the other was feeling just mildly unwell. What this pair did not realise was that when they had gone to the Life Church and Missions on Jan 19, they had picked up the virus that causes Covid-19 from another couple, both Chinese nationals from Wuhan. The Singaporean husband and wife did not know the Chinese couple, both 36, who were in Singapore to visit their family and had gone to the church on the day they landed here. The Wuhan couple fell ill five days later and were confirmed to have Covid-19 on Jan 27. Meanwhile, the local couple – a 54-year-old man and his 58-year-old wife – had already been infected. One of them – most likely the woman as she had been feeling mildly unwell prior to the dinner, passed on the virus to a 20-year-old man who lived at Mei Hwa Drive. This was to mark the start of a large Covid-19 cluster.

The young man works at Grace Assembly of God Church and was among the first of seven people at
People sitting outside Chin Moh Market on Wednesday. Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital, said one problem is that most people do not see themselves as vital cogs in breaking the chain of transmission. ST PHOTO: JOEL CHAN

A group of men sitting at a flight of stairs in Chinatown yesterday afternoon. The circuit breaker measures can work only if everyone plays his or her part. More than 1,000 people have been infected, and six have died. ST PHOTO: GAVIN TAN

the Chinese New Year gathering to become sick and confirmed to have Covid-19. He became Case 66.

He then passed the virus to others at the church. In all, through the Singaporean couple, 23 people became infected in the Grace Assembly of God Church cluster.

For the local couple, who carried the virus to the Midweek Drive get-together, the husband’s case was confirmed only on Feb 19.

The wife had already recovered by then, and her infection was discovered only because she was put through a serology test which confirmed that she had developed Covid-19 antibodies.

This pattern – of seemingly healthy people meeting and socialising only to realise later that someone among them had been infected by the coronavirus and had passed it on to others – has become distressingly familiar in Singapore.

Another example is the dinner at the Joy Garden restaurant at Safra Jurong on Feb 15.

The Chinese New Year dinner celebration organised by a music teacher resulted in a total of 47 cases – including the person who started the chain of infections.

There are other clusters that were caused by people socialising – such as the Singapore Cricket Club cluster that reported six cases of infection, one of whom has died; and here’s a sports bar in Boat Quay where nine people were infected.

"If we’re really enthusiastic if you passed the virus on to others today because you went visiting when you shouldn’t," said Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital (NUH).

Today, there’s little excuse for anyone to unknowingly spread the virus to others through socialising, with the circuit breakers in place for four weeks and no socialising allowed, even with family members if they are not living in the same household.

Prof Fisher said one problem is that most people do not see themselves as vital cogs in breaking the chain of transmission. He, on the other hand, holds exactly the opposite view.

"I think it is irresponsible to go out if you don’t want to," he said.

"Every individual person must comply and stay at home as much as he or she can.

"Ask yourself, ‘Do I need to go out? You might be feeling well but actually still have the virus. Or people you are with might have the virus and could infect you.

"So please, don’t risk anyone this long weekend.

If everyone stays home for the four weeks, it should break the chain of transmission."

Another infection diseases expert, Associate Professor Hui Li Yang of the National University’s School of Public Health, said the more stringent measures currently in place were needed, given the "dramatic rise in Covid-19 cases". But they can work only if everyone plays his or her part.

In less than three months since the first case was diagnosed here, more than 1,900 people have been infected, and six have died.

Prof Hui said: "Do not ask, ‘Do I feel lucky?’ Assume you won’t (be). Visiting dear ones and relatives in person can happen again once the local epidemic is under control again and restrictions are eased."

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