Flexible healthcare system needed to tackle ‘smart’ virus

It is able to target and infect the vulnerable, creating challenges for curbing the outbreak

Audrey Tan
Science Correspondent

The outbreak of Covid-19 is caused by a “smart” virus unlike any other, unique in its ability to infect humans and cause disease, a panel of experts said yesterday, adding that it was important for the healthcare system to be flexible so it can take on new challenges that the outbreak will pose.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital, pointed to infections at nursing homes and dormitories, said: “I am learning that this virus is really smart.

“The spread of Sars was similar but this virus spreads faster and more. This virus is really smart. It can find our blind spots, it can find vulnerable people, it can find areas where there is high transmission,” said Professor Fisher.

“The three-day average number of new community cases affecting those who live outside of dormitories has fallen from 46 at the start of the circuit breaker period to around 25 over the past three days, he said.

“Based on these numbers, we know that the circuit breaker is effective, but I am actually a bit disappointed that the numbers have not fallen as low as we were expecting,” he added.

This points to “leakages” in the community, whether they involve people who venture out without taking the necessary precautions or essential staff who may have to go to work, Professor Fisher added.

“This is why there is a need to perhaps step up the circuit breaker measures to now limit the definition of what is essential services and to further restrict the essential sectors at home more,” he said.

Professor Leong Yeow Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, noted that while Singapore had picked up important pointers from dealing with Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003, no two outbreaks were alike.

“This is very, very different from Sars,” she said, pointing to differences in terms of the scale of infections and the way the disease manifested in patients.

“No matter what system we have put in place, the more important thing is that the entire system must be flexible and be ready to take on whatever challenges it faces,” she added.

She said it was important for the public to understand why the month-long circuit breaker period was being extended by four weeks from May 4.

“Just as we learn from the past so we can deal with the next one, this is very much like Sars but better,” she said, adding that it was also important for the community to get behind the measures.

“Take your first shot and get your family fully vaccinated, it will help protect Singapore and even the whole world,” she added.

Panel of experts

The three experts The Straits Times brought together on The Big Story to discuss the Covid-19 outbreak and the effectiveness of the circuit breaker measures.

PROFESSOR LEONG YEOW SIN
Executive Director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases

The NCID has treated more Covid-19 patients than any other institution in Singapore. Professor Leong Yeow Sin was also the infectious diseases expert who led Singapore’s fight against Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003, the Sars outbreak in 2018 and, more recently, Singapore’s first imported case of the monkeypox last year.

PROFESSOR DALE FISHER
Senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital

Prof Fisher arrived in Singapore from Australia during the Sars outbreak.

In 2004, he joined thousands of volunteers around the world to help combat Ebola in West Africa.

In January, he was a member of the joint mission organised by the World Health Organisation and China to study the Covid-19 situation in Wuhan, where the virus is believed to have originated in December before spreading across the world.

PROFESSOR TEO YICK YING
Dean of the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health

A mathematician by training, Prof Teo specialises in biostatistics, population genomics and genetic epidemiology. The school has been actively helping the Government study and predict the trends of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Salma Khalik

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