Long-term effects of Covid-19 infection being studied here

Clare Chung

More than 500 Covid-19 patients here have registered as part of an ongoing study to monitor the long-term effects of the disease, which will continue for two years, and be helped by the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID). Work by researchers worldwide has found that the disease can wreak havoc on almost every organ, including the kidneys, heart, lung, bowel, gastrointestinal tract and neurological systems.

In Singapore, for example, a 40-year-old Covid-19 patient died of a massive pulmonary thromb-embolism — where blood clots get lodged in the lungs, more than two years after he contracted the disease.

But most patients remain out of the long-term complications seen overseas, as many are young and do not develop severe infections, said Associate Professor David Lim, a senior consultant and head of the NCID's Prevention, Treatment and Training Office in NCID. He noted that small numbers of them do suffer persisting lung injuries and were referred to lung specialists. The death rate in Singapore from this virus is also among the lowest in the world.

Agreeing, Associate Professor Tan Huey Cheen, a senior consultant and senior consultant of the division of infectious diseases at the National University Hospital, said that the recovery process is unpredictable for these young patients here.

"It is not true that Covid-19 will only affect younger people, there are also those with underlying medical conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure and past smokers," he said.

This is where the NCID's study plays an important role.

For one, doctors are keen to find out whether there is a link between the disease and underlying medical conditions that could lead to adverse long-term effects, such as lung damages and long-term inflammatory responses of the body can affect the heart too.

Professor Tan Huey Cheen, a senior consultant and director at the National University Hospital (NUH), said that his team has been looking into how long Covid-19 might persist in the body and whether it can cause heart problems.

"We want to know if there is a long-term or chronic infection in the body and what kind of impact will it have on the body system," he added.

The group has been analysing patients from different hospitals, including Singapore General Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, National University Hospital and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, in Singapore.

"The patients are from different hospitals, but we want to know if there is a common ground in terms of whether we can treat and manage the patients. We need to work closely with the hospitals to follow up on these patients," he said.

For most mildly symptomatic patients, they tend to experience fever, cough and fatigue, some might even develop long-term fatigue, with muscle and joint pain and loss of taste.

For those hit hard by the virus, however, the story is different. For patients with severe symptoms and who require hospitalisation in intensive care as a result of being on a ventilator, the side-effects can come in full force.

Doctors are keen to find out if there is a link between Covid-19 and heart inflammation, Professor Tan Huey Cheen, a senior consultant and director at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore, explained that troponin, a blood cardiac marker, is bound at elevated levels in up to 30 per cent of Covid-19 patients, a sign of heart inflammation or myocarditis.

Post-Covid-19 care is needed not just for the body, but also for the mind. Recovered patients can experience psychological effects ranging from mild adjustment to severe depression and anxiety disorders, said Dr Michael Yung, group chief in psychological medicine at the National University Health System.

"The range of severity is quite wide, from having the illness to being hospitalised and being isolated from others, lack of contact with friends and family, for some people like foreign workers, worries about future employability, income, job security and financial burden,” said Dr Yung, who is also the head of the Department of Psychiatry at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital.

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