Experts say S'pore has one of the lowest ICU admission and fatality rates, thanks to effective strategy

Timothy Goh and Clara Chong

While Covid-19 cases in Singapore have surged past 50,000, only a tiny fraction of those who fell ill — just 128, or 0.3 per cent — have been admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) as of Monday.

Experts and years of investment in healthcare, as well as a well thought-out and executed strategy to keep infection numbers low, have helped to ensure the republic has one of the world’s lowest ICU admission and fatality rates from Covid-19.

In the last two weeks, there has been no admission to the ICUs with the last patient discharged on July 14.

Of those who were in the ICU, more than three-quarters have fully recovered and been discharged.

Another eight are recovering in general wards in the hospital.

Still, not everyone got well, with patients dying from Covid-19-related reasons while four died of other causes.

Until now, Singapore has had 27 Covid-19-related deaths.

This makes for a case fatality rate of less than 0.3 per cent — an extremely low percentage compared with that of other developed nations.

According to John Hopkins University on Wednesday, the United Kingdom ranked highest in case fatality rate at 2.4 per cent, followed by Belgium, with an 11 per cent rate.

The cumulative case fatality rate in Singapore is a reflection of the nation’s high quality of healthcare, suggesting that doctors and ICU specialists were well trained and prepared to treat critically ill patients so they have a better chance of survival, said Dr Phua Keng Hoong, an adjunct senior research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

It also reflects how well stocked and equipped ICUs are, so patients are able to receive timely and proper treatment when needed, he added.

"The local rate is about one hundred times lower than those in western countries, and it is significantly lower than those in other Asian countries," he said, while noting that Singapore would have some admissions to ICUs and wards if they were to follow the guidelines of diseases in the pandemic era.

The low death rate and ICU admission rate are also a reflection of the success of the Republic’s healthcare system, said Professor Liew, director of the Global Health Programme at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore.

"We should appreciate that our low death rate is also because the system was not overwhelmed like in Wuhan (China) or Lombardy (Italy) which had death rates much higher than in other parts of China and India respectively," he said.

"We are beyond having a manageable number of patients, this is good fortune built on decades of investment in the healthcare system, including spending so many of our doctors and other health professionals to train in the best centres globally."

In the longer term, the pandemic has signalled the importance of making investments in health and healthcare, not just in equipment and facilities but also in human capital, Prof Liew said.

At a virtual press conference on July 7, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong, who chairs the task force tackling the Covid-19 outbreak, also said that the vast majority of patients were out of the ICU within four weeks and had been discharged, with more than 99 per cent of those who survived being discharged in 50 days.

"We should always be careful and we should always do our best to minimise community transmission because from our experience, we have also seen that the increase in the number of cases can be quite exponential... Therefore, we always have to be vigilant and minimise the risk of transmission," he said.

"We have a robust healthcare system, sufficient capacity to cope with any potential surge in coronavirus cases, ensuring our regular wards are Covid-19 wards and dedicated wards are Covid-19 wards."

"A comprehensive public education system is present and compliance from the public when it comes to guidelines like mask-wearing and safe distancing are critical in slowing the spread of the virus," Dr Phua said.

"A good public health system should not only inform people to keep the spirit of the rules, but also have a thorough enforcement system to catch recalcitrant offenders," he added.

Post-pandemic, an examination would be needed of how Singapore should allocate the use of its healthcare facilities, said Prof Lam.

"Does there exist a more sustainable capacity? What should our planning parameters be? There is a cost to carrying excess capacity in peacetime and we only appreciate and thank our lucky stars we have these in times of crisis," he said.

On the international front, Singapore should also be ready to contribute as a responsible member of the global community to capacity building in other countries that need support, and share its experience and lessons generously, he added.

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