

Source: The Straits Times, Page A4
Date: 5 August 2020

Phase 2 has gone well but curbs must be lifted gradually: Experts

They are optimistic about further easing but warn that risk of second wave is still present

Clara Chong

Singapore has made steady progress towards reopening the country, moving smoothly into the next stage of phase two while successfully keeping community transmissions low. But restrictions could return any time, experts stressed, as they have in many nations battling a resurgence of Covid-19 cases.

Having zero cases during a full lockdown is to be expected. But the real test of whether a country is coping well is allowing life to return to near normalcy while maintaining a low number of community transmissions for the long term, Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, told The Straits Times.

With the number of daily new community cases in the low single digits, further easing is set to hap-

pen – such as allowing some places of worship to hold gatherings of up to 100 people from Friday.

“We have to continue to stress-test the systems that we have put in place,” said Prof Teo, pointing to measures aimed at minimising community transmissions and facilitating contact tracing. These include putting a cap on the number of diners per table, safe distancing in public spaces and mask-wearing.

Prof Teo believes that further easing of the rules is set to happen, which would include allowing more people to gather socially.

“But I do hope this will not happen too quickly as Covid-19 remains highly transmissible and is still out there,” he said.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, noted that this cautious approach of relaxing restrictions has allowed Singapore to avoid a second wave of infections for now,

which has derailed efforts by other governments to reopen economies and ease restrictions.

For instance, Hong Kong had to implement further restrictions at the end of last month, including a ban on gatherings of more than two people. The Australian authorities also warned that a six-week lockdown in parts of the south-eastern Victoria state may last longer after the country registered its highest daily increase in infections.

Prof Cook is also optimistic about further easing here.

One big change will be the return of cross-border travel, Prof Cook said. Though imported cases from countries with high infection numbers is a real risk, it is something which the Singapore authorities have learnt to contain by putting travellers on quarantine, he added.

“But for lower risk countries, we can probably relax that without raising the risk too much, especially if the travellers are swabbed before entering the country. Might that allow business travel and some degree of personal travel?” Prof Cook mused.

CALIBRATED EASING

The pace of easing has to be calibrated so we are able to see which activities ought to be dialled back down, or monitored strictly... I am heartened that Singapore does not just relax restrictions, but continues to monitor what are the effects when restrictions are lifted.



PROFESSOR TEO YIK YING, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

However, Professor Dale Fisher, a senior consultant in the division of infectious diseases at the National University Hospital, said it is important that these decisions happen slowly, as introducing new mea-

asures gradually would give time for the authorities to assess if a particular change is adversely affecting infection numbers.

“The Covid-19 battle is a marathon and countries that rushed back towards pre-Covid life have paid a price,” Prof Fisher said, cautioning that Singapore cannot be too quick to count its chickens before they hatch.

“Any slip by individuals could spoil this delicate balance for everyone,” he warned.

Prof Teo said that where the Republic has done well is in the strict enforcement of the rules, such as around mask-wearing and safe distancing.

“The relevant authorities diligently monitor the implementation of regulations in workplaces and public spaces, and officers and ambassadors check and remind the public about the different guidelines. I believe this is the main differentiator between Singapore and other countries,” Prof Teo said.

Prof Cook added that a comprehensive testing strategy, extensive contact tracing and treating the quarantine of contacts seriously

have also helped to stem community cases.

But Prof Teo stressed that this does not mean the nation has the liberty to reopen faster.

“The pace of easing has to be calibrated so we are able to see which activities ought to be dialled back down, or monitored strictly. For example, it was prudent to re-enforce some restrictions, such as crowd control measures, on the number of visitors allowed at popular public spaces such as East Coast Park, Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and the Treetop Walk. I am heartened that Singapore does not just relax restrictions, but continues to monitor the effects when restrictions are lifted.”

What lies ahead for all Singaporeans is to continue helping the country maintain a near perfect score card, Prof Teo stressed.

“The moment a misguided policy is implemented, or a good policy is not adhered to, that is when cracks form and clusters start spreading. We need to look ahead, identify potential weak links and blind spots, and constantly remind everyone of their responsibility to keep this outbreak under control,” Prof Teo said.

Prof Cook said other places have shown how fragile a successful response can be – places like Hong Kong and Vietnam won praise for their management of the pandemic but both had to launch drastic measures to arrest outbreaks when a resurgence of cases happened.

“And this is a reminder that it, too, could happen here,” he said.

chongcjy@sph.com.sg