Whole-of-nation effort vital in Covid-19 fight: MOH official

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A whole-of-nation effort is essential in combating Covid-19, the Ministry of Health’s director of medical services Kenneth Mak said yesterday as he reflected on Singapore’s experience over the past nine months.

A combination of factors has kept the country’s fatality rate low, such as an effective public health system as well as the traditional management of clusters, including the early detection of cases, commitment and dedication towards isolating them and disrupting chains of transmissions, and the quarantining of close contacts, Associate Professor Mak said at a webinar titled Covid-19: Updates From Singapore.

The event was organised by the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and featured 16 speakers from around the world.

Prof Mak also cited the daring discipline to shut down – if necessary – services that contributed towards the spread of infection in the community.

Another critical factor in preventing deaths was a close watch over vulnerable patients and those at higher risk.

Prof Mak said: “We were determined to take those who were at higher risk and bring them into the hospital setting for closer monitoring and treatment, and by protecting those who are vulnerable, we have managed to keep the morbidity and complication rates low here in Singapore.”

Despite Singapore’s experience with the severe acute respiratory syndrome back in 2003, Covid-19 challenged the nation on various fronts: The Republic had to increase its lab capacity and the number of isolation and quarantine facilities and intensive care unit beds, as well as bring in additional resources and train new manpower, and recruit numerous volunteers to help fight the pandemic.

But through this ongoing episode of fighting Covid-19, the nation has learnt the importance of using new technologies and mastering new care models, as well as learnt the value of data and analysis, which help to drive contact tracing and to predict where the next cluster might erupt, Prof Mak said.

“We have learnt about how telehealth can change and disrupt... and bring new care models into our hospitals and primary care, we have learnt the value of public collaborations and... perhaps the most important lesson of all - the importance of maintaining public trust such that we would be confident that the public and the community, the society would be with us as we impose lockdowns, what we call locally the circuit breaker restriction of activities.”

Prof Mak stressed the importance of maintaining global solidarity, to collaborate to develop new diagnostic tests, vaccines and therapeutics, as well as the importance of collaborations across the global front to allow nations worldwide to safely reopen borders and resume economic activity.

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