Dorscon Orange to stay even as number of Covid cases fall

Health Minister Gan says alert level will remain at ‘severe’ because global infection numbers continue to rise

By YUEN FENG

Singapore will not be safe from Covid-19 until the world is also safe from the virus, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong told Parliament yesterday.

So in spite of the low case numbers in recent weeks, the outbreak alert level here will remain at orange until the authorities are confident that the global situation is under control, he said.

This comes as the rules on the number of people that can gather or dine together, and restrictions on overseas travel, look to be progressively eased as the Government works towards the phased resumption of economic and social activities.

Mr Gan was responding to Workers’ Party MP Louis Chee (Sengkang GRC), who asked if the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (Dorscon) level would be reviewed given the fall in new daily cases.

The Dorscon level, which shows the current disease situation and provides general guidelines on the measures needed, was raised from yellow to orange eight months ago on Feb 7, after a rise in unlinked local transmissions at the time.

Orange means the disease is severe, spreads easily, is present here but is being contained.

The raised alert saw additional precautions being taken, including quarantine, temperature screening and the suspension of inter-school activities.

But Mr Gan said yesterday that the Dorscon level is not determined by local cases alone.

He added: “At this moment particularly, we have to be very mindful that while the number of cases in Singapore is low, the cases around us in other parts of the world are still rising.

“Therefore, we have to continue to maintain the Dorscon level and keep our guard up so that we can continue to keep the number of cases low, especially in the community.”

Meanwhile, significant moves have been made towards restoring economic and social activities, such as allowing the resumption of work-related events and letting more people attend key life events such as weddings, he said.

Activities with larger attendances are being piloted and, if successful, will allow more large-scale events to proceed.

HIGHER RISK

Group sizes of more than five could also be allowed so larger families or groups of friends can meet and have meals together.

But Mr Gan warned that the risk of transmission when dining is considerably higher, as masks are removed when eating and drinking, and people also tend to talk at the same time.

While more people have been allowed to return to the workplace, capped at 50 per cent of the company’s workforce at any point in time — working from home will continue to be the default, even after Covid-10.

Mr Gan said: “We can’t totally do away with face-to-face physical meetings… but we will still encourage employers and employees to work out arrangements and allow working from home as much as possible.

“This will help to reduce the overcrowding in the workplaces (and) at the same time, also reduce the congestion on the roads and on public transport.”

Overseas travel will also be opened up further in a safe and calibrated manner to ensure that Singapore’s status as a travel and business hub does not get undermined, Mr Gan added.

Minister of Education Lawrence Wong yesterday said his ministry is also studying ways to resume more in-person activities in schools and institutes of higher learning.

Mr Gan said the current low number of community cases did not come about by accident.

“As overseas travel restrictions are progressively eased and more activities resume, it has become even more critical that each of us play our part to exercise social responsibility and adhere to the safe management measures,” he added.

Dr Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said Covid-10 would have to be eradicated locally to warrant a move back to Dorscon yellow.

He told The New Paper: “I don’t think that is feasible in the short to medium term. We will still be getting imported cases and the possibility of undetected chains of transmission.

“So until we have a vaccine, I don’t think we can think about moving down a level.”

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